

Narratives of Identity Among the Koyas of Telangana, India

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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Abstract

In India, there are over 700 communities that are classified as Scheduled Tribes (ST) and the ST population is estimated to be about 104 million, constituting about 8.6% of the total population of India. As ST communities reside in or near resource-rich lands, they are often the victims of exploitation, marginalisation, and land alienation. Despite the provision of social, economic and political guarantees for ST communities, development indicators have consistently shown that the socio-economic condition of ST communities remain worse off when compared with that of the general population in India. In response to these endemic conditions of marginalisation, tribal communities have sought to assert their claims to economic, social, and economic rights. One such community is the Koyas, a ST community residing in Telangana. In this thesis, I explore how the Koyas deploy multiple identities to assert their claims and rights and argue that their narratives are central to such identity assertions.

Through an ethnographic analysis of a Koya village where I conducted fieldwork for 14 months, I examine how Koya identity claims are deeply rooted in their everyday lives and changing cultural practices. I suggest that the ethnonyms they use are key to their understanding of their cultural, social, and economic rights, and focus on how they strategically deploy them to render their voices audible in diverse contexts. This strategic deployment of ethnonyms allows the Koyas to script Koya identity claims in diverse ways. These ethnonyms can serve as expressions of decolonial endeavours, where the Koyas refuse colonial stereotypes of primitivism and isolation and exercise their agency to state their identity on their own terms. They also allow the Koyas to engage in activism for their economic, social, and economic rights. The Koyas' assertion of identity and strategic use of ethnonyms are underpinned by rich narratives that draw on a range of historical, cultural, and religious elements. I explore how they interweave these elements to craft stories that deploy a form of 'strategic essentialism' in a bid to capture the essence of their culture and heritage. From the most common ethnonym, Scheduled Tribes, to other ethnonyms like Koitur, Adivasi, and Vanavasi, I document how each ethnonym contributes to the overall narrative construction of Koya identity.

However, the Koyas must navigate a complex web of state and non-state actors who often impose their own ethnonyms on the community, adding layers of contestation, ambiguity, and complexity to the Koya identity. Through an ethnographic inquiry, I look at why certain

ethnonyms and their narratives rise to the forefront, how they are shaped and expressed, and the ideologies that underpin them.

Throughout the thesis, I maintain that that Koya identity is continually evolving, and the Koyas face ongoing struggles for economic, social, and cultural rights. I seek to bring their story to life, exploring the vibrant narratives and complex contestations that define Koya identity. Finally, the thesis hopes to shed light on the complexities of identity formation by marginalized communities and highlight the importance of understanding the dynamics of cultural heritage of India's tribal communities.

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List of Abbreviations

ASU	Adivasi Students Union
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
COVID-19	The global coronavirus epidemic
BMYK	Birsa Munda Youth of Kamaram
IKK	Indigenous Knowledge of the <i>Koitur</i> of Kamaram
ITDA	Integrated Tribal Development Agency
MP	Member of Parliament
NCTM	Nehru Centenary Tribal Museum
OBC	Other Backward Class
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TCRTI	Tribal Cultural Research and Training Institute
VKP	Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad

Chapter 1: Introduction

In September 2018, I departed for Telangana, India, to embark on an ethnographic study of activists belonging to two organisations, Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad (translated to Society for the welfare of tribal communities) and Tudum Debba (translated to the beating of a drum). Both organisations were working actively amongst the Koyas, an Indigenous community in the southern Indian state of Telangana. I believed that studying the two organisations would help me better understand Koya activism, which centred on rights, development, and welfare. My initial plan was to meet activists from both organisations and study their efforts in advocating for the welfare and socio-economic development of the Koyas. By situating my fieldwork in a Koya village, I intended to examine the impact of these organisations at the grassroots level and gain insights into the everyday lives of these activists.

When I arrived in Hyderabad, the capital of Telangana, for the initial phase of the fieldwork which took place between September to mid November 2018, one of the first things that piqued my interest was the myriad of ethnonyms that people used when talking about the Koyas. I started my fieldwork by visiting the Tribal Cultural Research and Training Institute (TCRTI), Ministry of Tribal Affairs, India, to get a sense of the official discourse on the tribal communities in Telangana. In my conversations with a TCRTI official, I noticed that he kept using the words ‘Scheduled Tribe’ or its acronym, ‘ST’, when talking about the Koyas in Telangana. His usage of these ethnonyms is reflective of how the Indian state has designated ‘ST’ as the official nomenclature of the tribal communities in India. Hence, despite the pejorative connotations of ‘tribe’ and ‘tribal’, these terms have become the ‘noun shorthands’ (Sundar 2016b, 2) for the Scheduled Tribes in India. The word ‘tribal’ is used as a categorisation of the communities that the Indian state has denoted as ‘Scheduled Tribe’, rather than an adjective that conjures ‘images of ritually chanting half-clad men waving their spears around a fire while a large drum plays in the background’ (Sundar 2016b, 2). As this thesis will show, the orientalist images of tribals fixed in time immemorial is very different from what was revealed as a vibrant community asserting their identity while engaging with state and non-state actors.

When I arrived at the Koya village of Kamaram for my fieldwork in November 2018, among the first things that my host, Santosh, mentioned to me was, ‘You know that we are called Koyas, but the correct name should be *Koitur*’. He went on to explain that *Koitur* is the original

name of ‘Koya’ and ‘the proper and correct name of the tribal communities that have resided in central India since prehistoric time’. A couple of days later, I was invited by Arjun, a Koya youth activist, to attend an event organised by Tudum Debba. During the event, I kept hearing the word *Adivasi* in the speeches given by the Tudum Debba members. After the event had ended, I asked Arjun to explain to me the meaning of *Adivasi*. He replied, ‘*Adivasi* means the first inhabitants, so all tribals are the Indigenous peoples of India’. From his reply, I understood that *Adivasi* serves as a common term that my interlocutors use to foreground themselves as part of the larger category of first populations of the land (Jeffrey and Harriss 2014, 8). As I continued my interaction with the Koyas, their emphasis on using *Adivasi* when describing the tribal communities in India shaped the way I pursued my research in the field. Before long, I assumed that *Adivasi* was the most appropriate term when talking about the tribal communities in Telangana and adopted it in my daily interactions.

Yet, this assumption was soon put to the test as it led me to a tense encounter. While preparing for the fieldwork, I read about the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its *Hindutva* ideology, which aims to highlight a pan-Hindu nation as part of the age-old Hindu civilisation (Shani 2021, 264). The RSS aims at achieving a Hindu *Rashtra*, or state, in India. Their ideology has been characterised as a ‘variant of right-wing extremism’ and is manifested through ‘a wide range of forms, from violent, paramilitary fringe groups, to organisations that advocate the restoration of Hindu “culture”, to mainstream political parties’ (Leidig 2020, 216). During the early stages of my fieldwork, I was introduced to one of these organisations, Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad. About a month into my arrival, one of the Koyas invited me to visit a Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad hostel located near Kamaram. Upon reaching the hostel, I saw the warden and began greeting him with my standard introduction: ‘Good morning, Sir! My research is on *Adivasi* culture and religion...’. The warden responded with a stern look and interrupted me in a firm tone, saying: ‘You should *not* use the word ‘*Adivasis*’. They are not *Adivasis*. They are *Vanavasis*’. That reply was revealing. ‘*Vanavasi*’, a Hindi word that means forest dwellers is the term of choice by members of the Hindu right, who find the term *Adivasi*—‘first inhabitant’—challenging to the *Hindutva* project. I examine these issues later in the thesis, but for now I recall the tense moment, which was quickly defused when I apologised and professed my ignorance about the accurate nomenclature.

Nevertheless, names do matter, as I discovered during the early stages of my fieldwork. I began to observe, for instance, that the Koyas themselves deploy a variety of ethnonyms - Tribal, Koya, *Koitur*, *Adivasi*, Indigenous, Scheduled Tribe, *Vanavasi*, Hindu, *Koya Punem* —to

express their identities in different contexts or to strategically foreground certain aspects of their community. This is akin to what Spivak describes as ‘strategic essentialism’, that is, ‘a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest’ (1996, 76). Similarly, Eide, a professor in journalism, highlights how minorities in Norway deploy strategic essentialism as a tactic that involves the ‘advancing of their group identity in a simplified, collectivised way to achieve certain objectives’ (2010, 76). Likewise, by examining how the Koyas articulate these ethnonyms, it is apparent that identities are not homogeneous or essentialist markers but are often strategically deployed to advance certain interests.

Although I had initially planned to study activist organisations and activism, I was increasingly drawn to how Koya identity is articulated and negotiated through these ethnonyms. I was fascinated by the diverse etymological meanings inherent in these terms and how these meanings are shaped, contested, evolved, and rearticulated by Koyas and non-Koyas across diverse contexts. Admittedly, it was confusing at first because these ethnonyms meld into each other, whereas the usage of certain ethnonyms is at times contested by different state and non-state actors. In addition, there were certain descriptions that the Koyas rejected outright, especially that of ‘Naxalite supporters’.

The term ‘Naxalite’ traces its origin to a revolt led by a breakaway faction of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in the Naxalbari region of northern West Bengal. The insurgency was underpinned by a belief in Maoist ideology and the impetus by certain Indigenous groups to rebel against the Indian State, as many were dislocated, marginalised, and dispossessed of their lands and resources. Although the initial revolt in Naxalbari was crushed, it gave rise to an insurgency that garnered support ‘especially among low-caste poor peasants and agricultural labourers on the plains of Bihar, and more particularly among the tribals in the hills and forests of central and eastern India’ (Jeffrey and Harriss 2014, 131). Since the turn of the century, violent skirmishes have occurred between the Naxalites and the armed forces of the Indian state. This has led to the Naxalites being characterised as ‘the most potent threat to India’s internal stability’ (Ogden 2019). In response to the Naxalite threat, counterinsurgency operations were intensified, leading to a proliferation of security camps and a militarisation of the landscape in central India (Sundar 2019).

Given that the village is located near areas where there has been Naxalite activity, I was curious about how the Koyas perceived the Naxalite movement. When I conversed with my host, Santosh, about this, he was adamant that the Koyas are not Naxalites, and neither are they

Naxalite supporters. It seemed that the outright rejection of the Naxalite label was also a pragmatic move, for the village was located near a town with a strong police presence. Furthermore, there was too much at stake. To be tagged as a village sympathetic to Naxalites, would have serious implications on whether access to government support and welfare schemes could be granted. In addition, many of the Koyas who command respect in the village also work as police officers and government employees. Hence, when I raised the issue of the Naxalites, the Koyas sought to distance themselves from the movement, and overall, there was little to no mention of the Naxalites during my fieldwork. The avoidance of mentioning Naxalites or any links to Koya identity provides further insights into how certain community articulations and their respective ideologies are deployed selectively.

This thesis is an ethnographic inquiry into these varied articulations of Koya identity, as they try to navigate the contested socio-political terrain that has shaped ‘tribal’ lifeworlds over generations. It analyses the genealogies, meanings, contestations, and aspirations that emerge as a result of their encounters with state and non-state actors. Through ethnographic research, the thesis seeks to generate deeper insights into the identity politics that frame the Koyas in India. It reveals the different ideologies that underpin each articulation and how these ideologies come to cement or undermine the ways that Koya interlocutors perceive their communities and project them to the world. Thus, it shows that Koya identity is ‘a never-ending process, always incomplete, unfinished and open-ended’ (Meijl 2010, 71). Koya identity is always evolving, especially when projects of articulation, appropriation and contestation are in constant dialogue with actors within and outside the community and are responsive to changing social and political circumstances.

The remainder of this introduction is organised in a way that seeks to unpack key aspects of these identity constructions over time. Section 1.1 provides an overview of the scheduled tribes in India. Section 1.2 discusses the socio-economic conditions of these tribes. Section 1.3 describes the colonial constructions of tribal identity in India. Section 1.4 provides the main theoretical considerations for the thesis. Section 1.5 to 1.7 provides a broad summary of the fieldwork, which includes an introduction to the Koyas of Telangana and the field site. Section 1.8 outlines the structure of the thesis and followed by a conclusion in Section 1.9.

1.1 Overview of the Scheduled Tribes in India

To set the backdrop of the thesis, I begin with a brief overview of the Scheduled Tribes (STs) in India. Based on the 2011 census, 705 communities are classified as STs and the ST population is estimated to be about 104 million, constituting about 8.6% of the total population of India. Of the total ST population, about 80% live in the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Odisha, and West Bengal (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2011). As the Constitution of India does not provide any specific criteria to classify a community as ST, the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the Registrar General evaluate communities who apply for ST status against a broad criterion, namely, indications of primitive traits (such as pre-agricultural level of technology, and low literacy rates). distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large and backwardness. This criterion reflects colonial legacies that were embedded in the evolutionary theory of societies and cultures, which also helped justify the civilising project of the British colonisers. These terms were later adopted by the postcolonial Indian state, further fuelling the politics of identity - a subject I expand in the chapter 4, 'Scheduled Tribes'. The National Commission for Scheduled Tribes may exercise discretion by applying further parameters, for example, a traditional way of living, social customs, and religious practices.¹ However, Article 342 of the Indian constitution empowers the President, in consultation with the governor of each state, to have the final say about which communities can be classified as 'ST' (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2011). Furthermore, this classification is state-specific, and thus, a community declared as a 'ST' in one state in India need not be 'ST' in another. For example, the Gond community is classified as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) in states like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh, but is classified as an Other Backward Class (OBC) in the state of Gujarat.² As I will illustrate in Chapter 4, this has ramifications for it can lead to disputes over whether a community should be considered 'ST', because being classified as such carries certain privileges, including access to government jobs and educational institutions.

¹ These are the 1931 census and the Reports of the first Backward Classes Commission (Kalelkar) 1955, the Advisory Committee on Revision of SC/ST lists (Lokur Committee) 1965 and the Joint Committee of Parliament on the SCs & STs Orders (Amendment) Bill (Chanda Committee) 1967,1969.

² The term 'Other Backward Class' is used by the Indian state to denote communities who are deemed as socially and educationally backward.

1.2 Socio-economic Conditions of the Scheduled Tribes in India

Social, economic, and political guarantees are provided for the ST communities, for they are considered by the Indian state as the ‘the most underprivileged of the Indian society’ (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, n.d.). For example, they are provided reserved seats in universities and government jobs, protection of land rights through the *Forest Rights Act (2006)*. They are also given political representation in the form of reserved seats in the lower house of India's bicameral parliament, Lok Sabha, ensuring participatory democracy and self-governance through the *Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (1996)*. These guarantees, much like affirmative action elsewhere, have their roots in colonial rule (on which I will elaborate shortly). Hence, they were meant to help and uplift ST communities and improve their socio-economic conditions. Yet, human capital development indicators have shown that the socio-economic condition of ST communities remain worse off when compared with that of the general population in India. According to the Annual Report for 2021–2022 of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2022, 163), the literacy rate of STs as per the 2011 census is 59% whereas that of the general population is 73%. In terms of health indicators, the incidence of undernutrition is much higher among STs than among the general population—44% of ST children aged less than five years are stunted (low height for age), 45% are underweight (low weight for age) and 27% are wasted (low weight for height) (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2022, 41). This is reflective of the lack of health infrastructure for ST communities, where there is a shortfall of 6,602 sub-centres, 1,371 primary health Centres and 375 community health centres in tribal areas (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2022, 165). ST households tend to be poorer than those of other communities within the same locale, despite having similar demography, occupations, and education levels (Kijima 2006). In other words, even as these affirmative actions are, in principle, given to these disadvantaged communities, in practice, their limited access to such institutions and the lack of infrastructure mean that they remain marginalised. Several scholars have also argued that such affirmative action has become more of an electoral tool, designed to garner votes during election cycles and are provided in an ad hoc fashion and in return for support, rather than as long-term solutions (Higham and Shah 2013; Jaffrelot 2006; Middleton 2013).

Apart from low literacy rates, poverty and deprived access to infrastructure, a major issue faced by ST communities is that of land alienation. Land is a key source of livelihood for ST communities for it facilitates agriculture, horticulture, forestry and animal husbandry in mixed

farming systems. Without land, ST communities are deprived of their main source of income and face greater precarity. The various processes that exacerbate the land alienation of ST communities include the manipulation of land records, illegal transfers of land and the leasing or mortgaging of the land to non-tribals (Gilbert 2005; Rupavath 2015). Other forms of land alienation include encroachment by non-tribals, the manipulation of the settlement date of land disputes, marital alliances that allow non-tribals to purchase land under their spouses' names, and the falsification of records that eliminate villages from the scheduled areas and declare or notifying certain villages as falling within the scheduled areas (Dubey and Murdia 1977; Rupavath 2015). This is compounded by the encroachment of mining companies into tribal areas, which results in forced displacement, leading to further social and economic marginalisation.

Thus, tribal communities continue to be the most underprivileged and marginalised people in India, having 'gained least and lost most from six decades of democracy and development in India' (Guha 2007, 3305). One could argue that this is a result of poor governance and the failure of the state to safeguard the rights of the tribal communities. However, I maintain that the marginalisation of tribal communities goes beyond poor governance. Rather, it is linked to how tropes of 'backwardness' and 'civilizational lack' have become intrinsic to defining tribal communities in India (Sundar 2016b, 5). In tracing the roots of these pejorative tribal tropes to colonial constructions, I illustrate how a civilising discourse created by the British has facilitated the exploitation of the tribal communities to this day. Also, I discuss how these tropes have persisted after India's independence and how tribal communities, such as the Koyas, have been actively engaged in responding to such state-based denigration and in asserting their sense of identity in contemporary India.

1.3 Colonial Constructions of Tribal Identity in India

Prior to British colonial rule, tribal communities in central India largely existed as forest kingdoms and had their own social, economic, and political systems. The historian Bhangya Bhukya (2017) describes how Gond kings emerged as dominant political powers during the middle of the 13th century in central India, existing as independent states that ruled over vast territories. Despite invasions from the Mughals in the 16th Century and the Marathas in the 17th century, the Gond kings retained relative autonomy over their lands. However, these kingdoms met their eventual decline with the arrival of British colonial rule in the 18th century. The British sought to control the lands and resources belonging to tribal communities, reducing them to

tenants, and subjecting them to exorbitant rents, debts, and eviction. Although tribal communities responded through rebellions against the British, the lack of a unified resistance meant that these rebellions were quelled with force and further extended British dominion over tribal areas.³

To further solidify their rule, the British relied on what the historian and anthropologist Bernard Cohn, terms as ‘investigative modalities’ to ‘classify, categorize, and bound the vast social world that was India so that it could be controlled’ (1996, 4–5). These ‘investigative modalities’ were a result of extensive ethnographic data collection and manifested in the form of ‘government gazettes, reports, and histories’ (Cohn 1996, 5). For example, Sir Herbert Hope Risley (1891) and William Crooke (1896), both officials in the colonial administration, published the first two handbooks of tribes and castes in British India in the 1890s. These handbooks were described by the anthropologist Fuller as the ‘most detailed and comprehensive ethnographic studies of people living in India published in the Victorian age’ (2017, 29). Thus, scholars argue that these anthropological accounts were deployed as technologies of power designed to control and manage the Indian population.

Although these accounts provided rich ethnographic details about the tribal communities of India, there was little to no input from the tribal communities themselves. These communities were subjected to the anthropological gaze of the British and their assistants, who were non-tribals. In fact, most of these assistants belonged to upper-caste Hindu society (Cohn 1987). This lack of input from the tribal communities aptly fits Dirk’s description of colonial ethnography: ‘The colonised subject was first and foremost a body, to be known and controlled through the measurement and interpretation of physical subjects ... there was little interest in the subjectivity, will, or agency of colonial subjects’ (2011, 193). This ‘little interest in the agency of colonial subjects’ resulted in producing a civilising discourse that propagated the tropes of primitiveness and backwardness applied to tribal identity.

In what follows, I provide some examples here to illustrate the colonial discourse on tribal communities in India, beginning with Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari’s *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909). This seven-volume tome presented an extensive study of more than 300 castes and tribes of South India. Thurston was a protégé of Herbert Hope Risley and subscribed to the latter’s belief in racial theories, along with the use of anthropometry that

³ Examples include the Santhal Rebellion (1855–57), the Munda Rebellion (1899–1900), the Bhil Uprising (1818–31) and the Kol Uprising (1831–32).

featured prominently in his study. The historian Bhukya highlights how Thurston's use of anthropometry led to 'certain tribal communities being branded as habitual criminals on the basis of their physical features, and this provided a basis for police surveillance and control' (Bhukya 2008, 106). Here, I draw attention to Thurston and Rangachari's description of the Koyas; according to them, the Koyas:

lead an unsophisticated, savage life, and have few ideas ... They excite admiration by their truthfulness and simplicity; contempt by their drunkenness, listlessness, and want of thrift; amusement by their stupidity and their combination of timidity and self-importance; and disgust by their uncanny superstitions and thinly veiled blood-thirstiness... Their laziness is notorious, and their stupidity is attested by numerous stories (1909, 44, 47).

Another example is taken from Dalton's (1872) *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*. In his description of two tribal communities, the *Marias* and the *Gonds*, Dalton used phrases such as 'uncivilized ... they have very little clothing, wither for warmth or purpose of decency and as their bodies are generally begrimed with ashes and dirt, they do not present an attractive appearance'; 'primitive'; and 'very backward in arts' (1872, 277, 283–84). Similarly, Doron discusses how *Mallahs*, a boatmen community in Benares, were described as 'savages' and having 'criminal dispositions' in William Crooke's *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (quoted in Doron 2013, 37, 49). These examples point to how tribal communities are stigmatised as 'primitive' and 'savage', lending further legitimacy to the civilising mission of the British colonial rulers and the dispossession of these communities.

Hence, drawing on primary sources, along with studies by subsequent scholars, such as Dirks (1997), Bhukya (2008), Pels and Salemik (1999), we gain a better appreciation of how colonial anthropology was key to the project of homogenising and totalising tribal communities. Despite achieving independence from British rule, tribals in India remain trapped in the tropes of primitivism, backwardness and untrustworthy (Sur 2021, 58-9). This discourse, according to Bhukya, had the effect of 'stigmatising the adivasi social as primitive, uncivilised, isolated, barbaric, violent, human sacrificers, criminal, backward, and completely distinct from that of the normal human species in mentality and mode of livelihood' (2008, 109). They are seen as residual communities as opposed to Hindu or Muslim groups that are identified along the axis of nationhood and religion. Tribals continue to be seen through a 'civilising' discourse that places them in a static mode of identity and culture, further compounding their subordination

and prejudice by the Indian State in its various outfits.⁴ This is evident in contemporary reports, where the livelihood of the Koyas is described as ‘of a primitive nature, and their standard of living is low’ (Tribal Cultural Research & Training Institute 2018, 4). Their denigration and subordination are materialised in how tribal communities have little to no say when facing forced displacements and land alienation – an all too common occurrence, documented by various scholars (see, for example, Baviskar 2004; Ghosh 2016; Kumar and Puthumattathil 2018).

My concern in this thesis is in part to examine the implication of such static and pejorative depictions by state and non-state actors. I am equally interested in how the Koyas themselves makes sense of such portrayals of their communities and the way they deploy it to their own ends and projects. Such consideration necessitates a closer examination of tribal identity in India and through my subsequent chapters, I aim to illustrate how the Koyas are refusing this civilising discourse and forging their own sense of identity.

1.4 Theoretical Considerations

1.4.1 The Narrative Construction of Identity

Identity has long been, as Tanya Luhmann put it, ‘a vexed topic in anthropology’ (2001, 532). It is intertwined with concepts of self and personhood, hence necessitating some degree of clarity and differentiation of these concepts in any discussion pertaining to identity. As my thesis is about Koya identity, I will first attend to how concepts of the self and personhood may be distinguished from identity. According to Luhmann’s (2001) influential article ‘Identity in Anthropology’, the key elements that set the self apart from identity are the emphasis on introspection and the cognitive schemas that emerge from this introspection. These schemas can lead to a multiplicity of ‘selves’ as one interacts with the world. Thus, the concept of the self is malleable in terms of interior and cognitive capacities.

Tanya Luhmann defines the concept of the person as ‘an other-centered term’ (2001, 533), whereas psychological anthropologist Laura Appell-Warren writes about how an individual can attain different levels of personhood through ‘rituals, rites of passage and by other culturally recognized markers’ (2014, 125). Given the disciplinary focus on cultural practices, social

⁴ Here, I note that the Indian State is not a homogeneous entity and can be manifested in various forms, such as local functionaries, projects and institutions. I follow Gupta (1995) and Doron (2010) in examining how the Koyas encounter, imagine and contest the ‘state’ in their everyday lives, see also chapter 4.

relationships and structures, personhood has been a staple topic for generations of anthropologists (see, for example, Lamb 1997; Marriot 1976). These scholars point to how the concept of personhood is determined or revealed by what is external to the individual, both as interaction between individuals and various substances (for example, food) and through the types of rituals or rites of passage common in those cultures.

While scholars such as Paul Ricoeur (1992, D.P. McAdams (2011) and Mark Shroeder (2022) have highlighted how narratives are closely linked to personal identity and the creation of a coherent self, I place emphasis on how narratives are integral to the articulation of group identity.⁵ As such, I use ‘identity’ to refer to ethnonymically defined identity, which is intertwined with notions of self and personhood but exceeds it as well. I draw on Anna De Fina’s argument that ‘narrators build shared representations about who they are by creating story-worlds in which identities are characterized in common ways and routinely related to specific actions or reactions’ (De Fina 2006,351). Similarly, in her highly influential article, ‘The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach’, Somers writes that it is ‘through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities’ (1994, 606). In following Somers and De Fina, I focus on narratives and these narratives characterize the group identity of the Koyas and influence their actions. This concept of identity places the emphasis more on modes of knowing and being in the world, often anchored in stories and roles, as highlighted by the work of key scholars, such as Margaret R. Somers, Tanya Luhmann and Stuart Hall.

Below I elaborate on the studies that have inspired my primary concern on narrative identities for understanding Koya lifeworlds. Simply put, a narrative is a story that has a sequence, a beginning, middle, and end. When I apply this to an analysis of Koya identity, I am trying to understand the stories that the Koyas weave with respect to the ethnonyms that they deploy in their everyday lives. For example, when Koya interlocutors tell me, ‘We Koyas are *Koiturs / STs / Adivasis / Vanavasis*’, what is the story behind these identity claims? Or what is the narrative sequence that is encapsulated by this identity claim? It is by unpacking this narrative sequence that a more comprehensive and holistic analysis of Koya identity can be revealed. The narrative sequence for each ethnonym will be presented in a latter section. For now, my

⁵ The relationship between narrative and personal identity is seen in how an individual can forge an autobiographical self that emerges from his or her own experiences, interactions, and reflections.

point is that each ethnonym deployed by the ‘tribal’ Koyas, be it *Koitur*, Scheduled Tribe, *Adivasi* or *Vanavasi*, taps into a narrative and can be unpacked to expose the tensions, contestation and articulations that lie within. The anthropologists Barbara Götsch, and Monika Palmberger write, ‘[Anthropologists] ... study the content and the “social life” of a story: in other words, the way it is (co)created and altered; the different ways it is interpreted; how it is used to create, sustain, or mock identities’ (2022, 2). In take my cue from Götsch and Palmberger, I examine how each ethnonym serves a narrative of ‘social life’ for the Koyas, leading to multiple articulations, contestations, and articulations of Koya identity.

In their analysis of narratives and identity, Anna De Fina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou write, ‘portable identities, such as racial or ethnic ones, are often invoked as part of strategic negotiations with the interlocutor, rather than as categories with absolute and fixed meanings’ (Fina and Georgakopoulou 2011,190). As I will show in the following chapters, these strategic negotiations are manifested in how the Koyas seek to persuade, articulate and construct their versions of events, justifications of actions, evaluations of others and so on. Further, Fina and Georgakopoulou highlight the need of ‘analysis of interaction as a fundamental aspect of any study of narrative, and the investigation of the intimate links of narrative-interactional processes with larger social processes’ (Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008, 379). Luhmann argues along similar lines, for her ‘identity’ is a form to be mastered through the deployment of narrative complexity. It is the ‘narratives which one has to some extent chosen, whose mastery gives one a sense of direction, adequacy, and goodness’ (Luhmann 2001, 535). Identity is thus not limited to unitary, consolidated, and static narratives. Rather, it is the mastery of multiple narratives that present one’s identity in a given context. This view by Luhmann aligns with the focal point of my thesis, whereby I examine how the Koyas seek to author and control their own narratives in varied ways, operating within the constraints imposed upon them by history and social life.

Hence, my analysis hinges on unpacking these narratives within the larger social and political contexts that they reside in. I aim to illustrate that the Koyas' assertion of identity and strategic use of ethnonyms are underpinned by rich narratives that draw on a range of historical, cultural, and religious elements. It is also a recognition that these narratives are interactional and are interwoven into each other.

Last, I turn to the work of Stuart Hall, which I find especially instructive because of the way he avoids a unified, ‘solid’ identity and prefers to focus on its fragmented and constructed nature

to reveal how it is shaped through the inner working of discourses and positionality (Hall and du Gay 1996). In following Stuart Hall, I suggest that the unpacking of the ethnonyms used by my interlocutors can reveal how they construct their narratives and subject positions on identity, in multiple, and at times contradictory, ways. Such considerations generate deeper insights into the identity politics that shapes the worlds of my interlocutors and illustrate how tribal identity in India is an arena where discourses are created by various stakeholders, process (including language) and events.

1.4.2 Stuart Hall's Theory of Articulation

Perhaps one of the most influential theoretical concepts of the cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, is the theory of articulation. In an interview with Grossberg (1986, 53), Hall defines his theory of articulation as follows:

a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects.

Scholars have deployed his framework in a myriad of ways, from analysing articulations of poverty portraiture (Lemke 2010) to making sense of the increase in support for populist neo-nationalists in Finland (Lehtonen 2015) and delineating the intersection between public pedagogy, ideology, and culture (Giroux 2000). The varied ways in which Stuart Hall's theory of articulation have been applied makes it a useful heuristic device to analyse Koya identity. Hall draws our attention to the double meanings of articulation, using what he calls the 'articulated lorry' metaphor. Accordingly, the lorry metaphor is designed to highlight how articulation is the assembling of different elements to create a coherent narrative under certain conditions. In applying the theory of articulation to analyse narratives of Koya identity, I seek to illustrate how the Koyas act as bricoleurs to assemble what Hall terms as 'ideological elements' in a coherent manner to inform their projects. This can lead to a reification of these narratives as 'fit for purpose', and thus flexible enough to work effectively within the dynamic socio-political conditions of India. To this end, I suggest that Stuart Hall's theory of articulation can be applied to frame my analysis through three broad themes: linkages, hegemony, and aspirations.

By linkages, I refer to the ways and connections that actors render to creatively generate historical, religious, and cultural ideologies and practices as emergent aspects relevant to the forging of their identities. Let me give an example. In my early days in the village, one of the

Koyas would often puzzle me by insisting that Koyas are not Hindus, even if they pray to the God Shiva, a major Hindu deity. He argued that such worship was perfectly compatible with Koya identity since Shiva is regarded as a tribal god in origin. In this instance, I am not too concerned about the veracity of the statement, but rather, the act of appropriation of Shiva and to ask: What connections or (dis)connections are rendered in such statements and practices? What is the intentionality and the effect of this articulation? Furthermore, these connections appear to allow for change and contestations. For instance, interlocutors from the RSS argue that the ‘correct’ ethnonyms for tribal communities should be *Vanavasi*, not *Adivasis*. I had mentioned this earlier when discussing my encounter with the VKP warden. Here, I want to note how this speaks to an articulation seeking to denote Koyas as *Vanavasis* for particular ends. It is aimed at emphasising the assimilation of these communities into the Hindu fold while maintaining the Aryan privilege of Hindus as the original inhabitants of India. Hence, it is useful and productive to unravel the connections inherent in each of these articulations.

The articulation of one’s identity is often seen as ‘common sense’ and thus can be construed as hegemonic in so far as it appears as shared, coherent, and unitary. Yet when carefully scrutinised, it is revealed as a product of contesting historical and ideological processes. The application of Hall’s theory of articulation allows me to examine how this ‘common sense’ is constructed and applied in different contexts. This is especially salient when examining key ethnonyms, such as ‘Scheduled Tribe (ST)’, a hegemonic construct that mediates a ‘dominant conception’ of the world that the Koyas inhabit and manifests the governance by the Indian State. Hall’s theory of articulation also calls for ‘paying attention to common sense, its multiplicity, its fractures, the desires it voices, the silences it contains, and more’ (Clarke 2015, 280). By questioning the ‘common sense’ of these articulations of Koya identity, we can trace how these ethnonyms have been embedded into administrative parlance, as much as into the everyday experiences of interlocutors.

Some articulations are foregrounded over others and thus enable and constrain different forms of practices and empowerment. I am interested to see how these articulations of Koya identity by my interlocutors are performed purposely, how they empower them, and why and how certain aspects of Koya identity formation come to be defined and emphasised and under what circumstances. This leads me to my final point. I suggest that articulations of Koya identity allow for the creation of possibilities and the realisation of aspirations. Appadurai (2004, 76) describes the capacity to aspire as the ability to read ‘a map of a journey into the future’. Similarly, articulations of Koya identity generate a cultural capacity to aspire as they provide a

roadmap for the Koyas to imagine what ‘Koya’ is, as much as what Koya should be. As I will show in the thesis, the Koyas strategically assemble to construct a coherent narrative that they seek to actively forge and control, as they relate it to the past, and in some instances, project it to the future.

1.5 The Koyas of Telangana

Having set the theoretical considerations of the thesis, I now move to the fieldwork itself. I begin with an overview of the Koyas of Telangana. According to the latest census figures, the tribal population in Telangana stands at 31.78 lakhs, which is approximately 3 million, and accounts for about 3% of the total tribal population in India. The Koya population in Telangana is the second-largest tribal community with a population of about 3 lakhs. They reside mainly in the hilly areas of West Godavari, East Godavari, Khammam and Warangal districts and are sparsely found in Adilabad and Karimnagar districts. They are classified into five exogamous phratries, namely *Mudogatta*, *Naligatta*, *Aidogatta*, *Perumboyadu (Arogatta)* and *Yedogatta*.⁶ According to the anthropologist Stephen Tyler (1965, 1429), there are no differences in rank among these phratries and all but two may intermarry. Also, there are deities associated with each phratry which may be worshipped only by the male members (Tyler 1965, 1429). Marriage by negotiation is the preferred method among the Koyas, and cross-cousin marriages are encouraged. The Koyas are mainly settled cultivators and grow paddy, *jowar*, *ragi*, *bajra* and other millets. The Koyas who live near the forests commonly collect forest products, such as tubers and roots.

1.6 Encounters in the Field

Like many fieldwork encounters, my encounter with this specific Koya community in rural Telangana was a serendipitous one. Prior to starting my PhD with the Australian National University, I pursued a Master of Social Anthropology degree from University of Hyderabad, Telangana, from 2012 to 2014. As part of the degree requirements, our class had to conduct a group ethnography with a tribal community in Telangana in 2013. Our professors decided on the Koyas and selected the village of Kamaram as our primary fieldsite. It was during this period of fieldwork that I was introduced to activists from Tudum Debba, Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad volunteers and government officials from the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA).

⁶ The groups are Gutta Koyas, Gommukoyas, Kammara Koyas, Musara Koyas, Gampa Koyas, Oddi Koyas, Doli Koyas, Kapu Koyas, Matwa Koyas, Linga Koyas and Racha Koyas.

The group ethnography soon developed my interest in tribal identity and activism. Over the years, I continued to maintain good relations with the Koyas in Kamaram and that paved the way for me to conduct my thesis fieldwork in 2018.

In September 2018, I arrived in Hyderabad, the capital of Telangana, to commence my fieldwork. In the first few months, there were a couple of encounters that shaped my initial thoughts on Koya identity. First, I was introduced to the Tribal Cultural Research and Training Institute (TCRTI) through my contacts in Hyderabad Central University. The TCRTI is under the ambit of the Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Telangana. Its responsibilities include conducting ethnographic studies, evaluating welfare programs and verifying the ST status of tribal communities. From my interactions with the TCRTI officials in Hyderabad, I gained a better understanding of the official discourse that surrounds the tribal communities of Telangana. An observation that arose from my interactions was how access to government policies and welfare schemes was inimically tied to whether an individual is accorded the status of belonging to a ‘Scheduled Tribe’. This observation formed the inspiration behind one of my chapters (Chapter 4), in which I examine how the term ‘ST’ serves as a key narrative of Koya identity. Furthermore, the TCRTI had built a tribal museum and a small library that housed books on tribal communities in Telangana. Through my visits to the museum and library as well as my visits to the Telangana State Archives, I acquired information that helped in my preparation for my upcoming fieldwork with the Koyas.

As mentioned in the introduction, I was interested in the work of Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad (VKP) and I initiated visits to its headquarters during the initial phase of the fieldwork. After establishing rapport with the volunteers at the VKP headquarters, I became more familiar with the work and ideology of the VKP. Furthermore, there was a VKP hostel located near Kamaram, and my visits to the hostel at the later stages of my fieldwork showed me how the VKP plans to assimilate Koya identity through identifying the Koyas as *Vanavasis*. Their project to assimilate Koya identity is the focus of Chapter 6. After about three months in Hyderabad, I moved to Kamaram to commence the main phase of my fieldwork.

1.7 The Koyas of Kamaram Village

Kamaram village is located about 3 km from Tadvai, a town in Mulugu district, Telangana (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). For the Koyas in Kamaram, Tadvai serves as an important centre because government offices and various amenities, such as a small bus station with direct buses to

Hyderabad and other villages, are located there. Using the direct bus connections, the youths in Kamaram study in the degree colleges in urban centres or at Kakatiya University, located in Hanmankonda, Warangal. Its proximity to Tadvai has helped the village to develop in line with what is generally considered development by the locals and administration. That is, most of the houses are built using concrete (pakka) and have access to electricity. There is 3G connectivity for cell phones, which was upgraded to 4G during the mid-point of my fieldwork. Most of the Koya families have access to cable television, and with the help of government schemes, a toilet has been installed in every home. The Koyas of Kamaram have largely adopted Telugu and many of the youths do not know the Koya language. However, this does not reflect a narrative of cultural eradication. In terms of occupation, the majority of the Koyas in Kamaram are agriculturalists and grow paddy, cotton and chilli. They also rear cattle, and the families take turns to bring the cattle out for grazing. Some of the Koyas also work as teachers, police officers and government employees. From my observations, these government jobs are desired by the Koyas and those who hold these jobs tended to wield considerable influence and clout in the village. This desire for government jobs resonates with the anthropologist Begoña Aretxaga's (2003, 395) characterisation of the state as a 'social subject', where one has to consider the 'discourses, narratives, and fantasies generated around the idea of the state'. I will expand on this further in the subsequent chapters where I examine the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of the Indian state in the everyday lives of the Koyas, as expressed in how the state is the source of both marginalisation and upliftment of the community.



Figure 1.1: Map of Telangana State

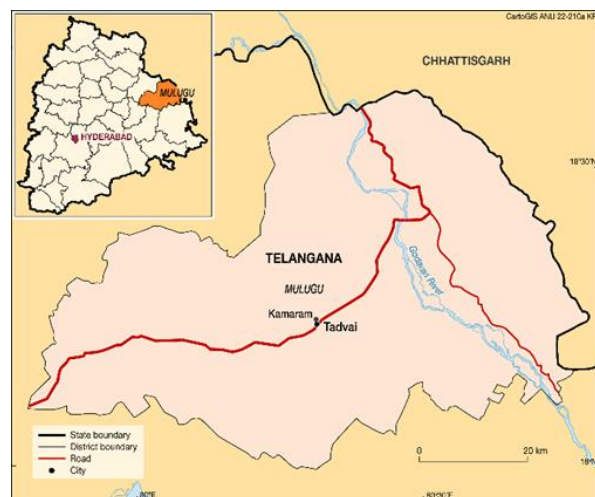


Figure 1.2: Location of Kamaram Village



Figure 1.3: View of Kamaram Village

Figure 1.3 shows the village of Kamaram; it is divided into two hamlets, or *gumpus*, A and B. From my conversations with one of the village elders, I understood that both hamlets coexisted as one village and that over time, an influential Koya clan emerged in each hamlet, the Regas in Hamlet A and the Kornibellis in Hamlet B. The Regas, on account of their larger numbers and marriage alliances, have always chosen the chief, or *Sarpanch*, of the village. This caused some discontent for the Kornibellis for they could not nominate a member from their clan to represent their interests. Despite this, both clans maintained cordial relations in the village, and there were marriage alliances between both clans with no signs of overt tensions.

However, things took an ugly turn in 2007 when a Rega man from Hamlet B murdered his wife, who was a Kornibelli, in the forest. According to a relative of the deceased, the man kept hearing rumours about his wife being unfaithful; and out of jealousy, he killed his wife.⁷ The murder enraged the village elders, who decided that the family of the murderer was to be banished. Banishment meant that even though the family was allowed to stay in Kamaram, they were excluded from all village activities in both hamlets. This showed that while the law of the state had already penalised the murderer, the Koyas meted out their own punishment. It reflects how the Koyas interact with the everyday state in a dynamic fashion, accepting the laws of the state while also expressing their own sovereignty. The murderer lived in Hamlet B, and hence,

⁷ Given the sensitive nature of this event, I could not probe further about what truly provoked the murder. My questions regarding this matter were mostly met with an uncomfortable silence or the answers were mostly about the man being jealous.

it led the people from Hamlet A to distance themselves from those in Hamlet B. It reached a point where people moved from one hamlet to another, depending on their alignment with the Regas of Hamlet A or the Kornibellis of Hamlet B. This eventually culminated in a village that is administratively one, but in reality, split into two.

It was under such circumstances that I entered the village for my fieldwork. I had read *The Remembered Village* by M.N Srinivas (1976), and his pioneering monograph provided a detailed narrative of everyday life in a village and the dynamic nature of caste relationships. I was drawn to how he followed the principle of participant observation judiciously and experienced the anxieties of fieldwork. It gave me a preview of what a village ethnography would entail. However, his structural–functionalist view provided an overly rosy picture of the village and obscured the deeper power relations and the effect of social change (Patel 1998, 59-60). When I reached Kamaram, it became clear that issues of power and politics, the effects of social change, and external influences underpin relationships in the village.

The village tensions outlined above meant that each hamlet had a village elder in charge of resolving issues within the hamlet, and everyday activities were largely confined to each hamlet. Administratively, both hamlets were still considered one village; hence, there was only one *Sarpanch*. Every morning, without fail, he would walk over to Hamlet B and chat with the village elder in charge of Hamlet B. He would attend important events, such as weddings, funerals and festivals. There was little interaction between both hamlets, except at times when the youths from both hamlets would occasionally play volleyball together. Political affiliations were also split as each hamlet had voted for different candidates in the district elections. There are differences, conflicts, and disagreements in every village, but it is rare to see a village being split into two distinct and independent hamlets even though everyone belongs to the same tribe. In other words, yes, they all identify as Koyas, but frictions, suspicions and the weight of history meant that they could not reach a common goal, even in critical matters such as electing a person to represent their common interests. It was clear that solidarity was never a given.

This tussle over power and influence is not restricted to the Koyas in the village. It is often the case that in fieldwork one is co-opted or appropriated as part of a group. I realised that over time, I was being co-opted by Hamlet B since my host had aligned himself closely to the Kornibellis. Whenever I would walk towards Hamlet A, the village head of Hamlet B would ask me where I was going. Although no one would stop me, and possibly, they were genuinely curious about my whereabouts, it was evident that my movements in the village were of concern

to the people in my hamlet. Although I was able to move freely between both hamlets, my living arrangements in Hamlet B meant that I had much more interactions with the Koyas in Hamlet B. This translated into me being invited to every religious and social events in Hamlet B. I was made a member of the youth organisation started by the youths in Hamlet B and when I returned to the field site after my wedding in Singapore, the Koyas of Hamlet B organised a small celebration for my wife and me (see also conclusion).

Even though I was warmly welcomed by the Koyas in Kamaram, I was fully aware of my positionality as a single, male, Chinese Singaporean in his late thirties and someone who had dwelled in urban spaces for most parts of his life. My positionality proved to be a double-edged sword as it presented both challenges and opportunities when I commenced my fieldwork over the course of 14 months. One of the key challenges was my limited interactions with the Koya women in Kamaram. As a male fieldworker, I had little access to the Koya women in Kamaram and their lifeworlds. This was because I was seen as the ‘outsider’ who was interested in research and to them, that meant issues of larger concerns, such as politics, religion, and identity. Coupled with my age, I was expected to interact with the senior male members of the community. When I joined the Koya women on their everyday activities, such as planting and harvesting paddy, collecting water from the borewells, I was often met with bemusement as that wasn’t my ‘expected’ duty. Although I could get some insights through these interactions, it was difficult to build a rapport with the Koya women, despite my best efforts to do so. Also, I was cognisant that I was the ‘foreigner’ and just as I mentioned earlier, would potentially be appropriated by Koya male interlocutors in Kamaram. There were many instances that I was asked by different members of the community to attend social events in other parts of Telangana, and they would persuade me by saying that these events are ‘important for my research’. It was an arduous process and fieldwork by its nature is an exciting and open-ended process. Over time, I became more adept at managing their expectations and maintaining some level of control over my time.

Despite these challenges, my positionality did help in making the fieldwork an enriching experience. With the help of my Koya interlocutors, I gained access to Koya rituals and festivals, spoke to government officials, and went on fieldtrips. As an outsider in many aspects, I was curious about everything and even things that seemed ‘normal’ or taken for granted by the Koyas were of interest to me. This curiosity led to me asking many questions and in some respect also ‘forcing’ my informants to reflect on the answers. I thus gained a deeper

understanding of the complex nuances in Koya identity, which disrupted any assumptions I may have had of tribal identity in India (on which more below).

One of most significant experiences during fieldwork in Kamaram, and which helped shape this thesis was my continuing collaboration with my key interlocutor Arjun and the youths in Kamaram. I met Arjun during the fieldwork stint for my master's, and we decided to collaborate on a research project about Koya Indigenous knowledge. We continued to stay in touch and shared ideas on how to train the youths in collecting ethnographic data. When I commenced my thesis fieldwork in Kamaram, Arjun had initiated the project with the Koya youths. The collaborative project culminated in a publication on Koya Indigenous knowledge in Telugu. We wanted to expand the scope of the book, and hence, we continued to collect data and organise field trips during the summer months. Being part of this project and my collaboration with Arjun and the youths of the village as a case study, I could gain further insights into how the Koyas in Kamaram articulate their own narrative on Koya identity—as detailed in chapter 2.

With the help of Arjun, who was also a Tudum Debba leader, I interacted with members of the Adivasi Students Union (ASU). The ASU is the student wing of Tudum Debba and its members are responsible for organising rallies and meetings in Koya villages. It was an eyeopener as I observed how activism for the Koya community was manifested at the granular level. During my fieldwork, Arjun decided to join a political party and contest the local elections. By accompanying him on his electoral campaign, I gained valuable insights into the intertwining of activism and cultural politics at the grassroots level, itself centred around the careful crafting of '*Adivasi*' narratives.

In February 2018, I attended the Sammakka Sarakka *Jatara*, a biennial Koya festival that has gained immense popularity with devotees from tribal and non-tribal communities. This *Jatara* is the largest tribal festival in India—approximately 10 million people attended it in 2018. Moreover, I attended another Koya festival, Rekkala Ramakka *Jatara*, held in a town located 150 km from Kamaram. Of note, this festival was attended only by Koyas. A couple of months after this *Jatara*, my host performed a Koya clan ritual at his home. Through observing these Koya festivals and the clan ritual, I discuss how Koya religious identity, as expressed in the term *Koya Punem*, is subject to contestations and connected with social memory.

Apart from working on the project, going for meetings and attending festivals, I participated in the everyday activities of the Koyas, such as planting and harvesting paddy, fishing and herding

cattle. Although these activities were not directly related to my research aims, participating in them allowed me to build rapport with the Koyas and gain a better understanding of their everyday lives and relationships that in the village. Owing to my rudimentary knowledge of Telugu, I was dependent on my key interlocutor, Arjun, and the youths in Kamaram to be my translators. In talking to them every day and participating in their activities, I became a regular feature in their daily lives. The Koyas were welcoming and helped me in understanding their ‘culture’ better. In fact, the youths of the village even gave me a moniker ‘Elvin Bro’ that stuck with me throughout the fieldwork.

The rapport that I built with some of the Koyas led me to many unplanned moments, which were interspersed throughout my fieldwork. These moments often led to interesting encounters and productive conversations. Most of these moments occurred when I was engaged in what the Chicano poet-anthropologist Renato Rosaldo describes as ‘deep hanging out’, that is, a prolonged, informal and relational immersion with one’s interlocutors (attributed to Renato Rosaldo, quoted in Clifford 1996, 5, also see also Geertz 1998). For instance, I would often sit near the volleyball field and watch the youths play volleyball in the evenings. As the youths would play volleyball daily, it was also a time when people would gather to chat (see Figure 1.4). During this ‘deep hanging out’ also meant that the Koyas would invite me to visit a place or attend a meeting without prior notice. For instance, Arjun would tell me to get ready quickly and we would be on a bike visiting another village or on a long car ride to Hyderabad for a meeting. A Koya elder would ask me to hop onto his bike and we would go to another village to celebrate the birth of his grandchild. These unplanned trips soon led me to memorise my favourite Telugu phrase, ‘*Manam ekkadiki velunnāmu?*’ (‘Where are we going?’).



Figure 1.4: Chatting by the Fire with the Koyas of Kamaram

As I engaged in participant observation with the Koyas, I soon realised that people held different notions about the ethnonyms that they use and affiliations to their religious and political identities, even though they all shared the same identity of being Koya. I was reminded of how ‘participant observation makes us question our fundamental assumptions and pre-existing theories about the world; it enables us to discover new ways of thinking about, seeing, and acting in the world’ (Shah 2017, 47). For me, these were assumptions I held about the nature of identity, as one held by more or less firm ideas about religious affiliation, ethnic or linguistic background, and place. Yet, as I examined the ways the Koyas of Kamaram understood and articulated their ethnonyms in their everyday lives, it highlighted how Koya identity is never static and far more dynamic than I originally envisioned. Through the various narratives in which Koya identity is articulated, the interweaving and interaction of various social forces are highlighted, for example, law, religion, and state, that constitute the term Koya.

Thus, I will analyse in detail the various terms that the Koyas in Telangana use to articulate their social, political, and religious identity. Before I outline the structure of this thesis, let me recap key points. In analysing each of these terms (*Koitur*, *Adivasi*, Scheduled Tribe, *Koya Punem* and *Vanavasi*), I do not seek to answer the question, ‘What is Koya identity?’ Nor do I claim that Koya identity is an amalgamation of these terms articulated by the Koyas in my field site. Given that identity is always complex, ambiguous and accommodates at times

contradictory narratives and roles, any claim to a singular and homogenised identity is bound to be contested. Put simply, a single answer to ‘What is Koya identity?’ is unavailable.

However, such contestation and fluidity do not mean that Koya identity is in constant flux. People use various terms to express aspects of their identity, in accord with the contexts they operate within. They might also assert different terms to gain strategic advantages, such as access to legal rights and resources. Members of the Koya community too deploy different terms, and positionalities to highlight or foreground different aspects of their identity, in an attempt to present it in a coherent, stable and, at times, assertive manner.

The aim of my thesis is to ascertain the reasons that Koyas in my field site identify themselves with these ethnonyms, the narratives that emerge from these terms, and the ideologies that underpin these narratives of identity. I also examine how some of these ethnonyms are imposed on the Koyas by state and non-state actors and how the Koyas make sense of them in their everyday lives. Hence, this thesis is about narratives of Koya identity and an ethnographic inquiry into why certain narratives come to the forefront, how these narratives are expressed and articulated, and the contestations, ambiguities and complexities that can emerge from these narratives.

1.8 Thesis Structure and Chapter Outline

In this section, I offer a synoptic table (see Table 1.1) to outline the administrative classifications, or ethnonyms, and their respective narrative sequences that I address in this thesis. Notably, these narratives are not mutually exclusive. Rather, one can find them residing within an individual or the way the ‘community’ might seek to represent itself in different contexts. A Koya would say, ‘I am ST and *Adivasi*’. I suggest that by saying this, an individual is not just equating *Adivasis* to STs but is also linking the legality of the ST status with wider claims of indigeneity. These ethnonyms are canvassed together, linking individual and community, whereby administrative classifications alongside historical and contemporary considerations are brought to bear in shifting ways, as described in this section. As such, the narrative sequences are not the only narrative expressions that will be explored in this thesis. Rather, they form the initial framework from which other narrative expressions emerge. Also, I note that *Jatara* and *Panduga* are not ethnonyms. However, they represent key expressions of Koya religious identity and thus, deployed as a framework for the chapter.

Table 1.2: Thesis Structure and Narrative Sequence

Chapter	Ethnonyms /Terms	Meaning(s)	Narrative Sequence	Themes
2	<i>Koitur</i>	People, human beings Origin: Gond	Beginning: The Koyas used to be called ‘Koiturs’ in the past, but no longer. Middle: The Koyas initiated a research project about their culture and history. End: Through the research project, the Koyas are claiming that they are Koiturs and have our own history and culture.	Sociocultural identity, decolonisation and prefigurative politics
3	<i>Adivasis</i>	Original inhabitant, Indigenous Origin: Hindi	Beginning: The Indian state does not recognise tribal communities as Indigenous. Middle: When the Koyas assert their identity as Adivasis, it is a demand to be recognised as Indigenous and for the Indian state to protect their rights. End: Their assertion as Adivasis intertwines indigeneity and activism to forge a better future for tribal communities	Indigeneity, activism, politics
4	Scheduled Tribe, Tribe, Tribal	Communities denoted by the Indian State. Origin: Legal and constitutional term	Beginning: The Indian state uses Scheduled Tribe (ST) to define the tribal communities in India. Affirmative action policies are tied to whether a community is defined as ST or not. Middle: Since Koyas are STs, they hold the state accountable for ensuring that their reservations are not infringed. Also, the Koyas do not recognise the Lambadas, another tribal community, as STs. This has resulted in a rift	Legality and rights

			between the Adivasis and Lambadas in Telangana.	
			End: The Adivasi-Lambada rift brings to the forefront of the identity politics surrounding the ST status.	
5	<i>Jatara, Panduga</i>	Religious festivals Origin: Telugu	Beginning: The Koyas use <i>Jataras</i> and <i>Pandugas</i> to assert their religious identity. Middle: The <i>Jataras</i> and <i>Pandugas</i> highlight how the Koyas, while they also worship Hindu gods and celebrate Hindu festivals, articulate their own sense of religious identity, which cannot be reduced to merely Hinduism. End: By asserting their religious identity through <i>Jataras</i> and <i>Pandugas</i> , it shows that Koya religious identity cannot be reduced to Hinduism nor tribal religion. It is a mixing and matching of elements from both traditions.	Religious identity, social memory
6	<i>Vanavasi</i>	Forest dweller Origin: Hindi	Beginning: The Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad (VKP) claims that the Koyas are Vanavasis (forest dwellers) and not Adivasis. Middle: The VKP promote this claim, which is aligned with Hindutva ideology, amongst the Koyas through their welfare programs. End: The VKP hopes to assimilate the Koyas into the Hindu Rashtra, which is a key objective for Hindutva organisations.	<i>Hindutva</i> , assimilation and appropriation

For clarity, I follow Sundar (2016, 2) in using ‘tribe’ or ‘tribal’ to refer to the communities that the Indian State has denoted as ‘Scheduled Tribe’, and ‘Koya’ to refer to the tribal community that I worked with. In what follows, I provide a brief outline of the chapters in this thesis.

1.8.1 Chapter 2 *Koitur*: Decolonising Koya Identity

In this chapter, I examine how the Koya youths in the village initiated a research project, titled ‘*Indigenous Knowledge of the Koitur of Kamaram (IKK)*’, on Koya Indigenous knowledge and developed their own narrative of Koya identity through the term *Koitur*. I suggest that this is not merely an attempt to salvage Koya history and Indigenous knowledge per se. Instead, I argue that this project is also a decolonising endeavour by the Koyas to develop their own discourses on the elements that constitute Koya history, knowledge, and identity. Terms such as ‘decolonising’ and ‘prefigurative politics’ which I use in this chapter are of an analytical order and capture what I regard as vital aspects of this narrative construction of identity.

This decolonising project, for instance, is demonstrated in two ways. First, as a manifestation of refusal, where ‘refusal is often a part of political action, of movements for decolonization and self-determination, for rights and recognition, for rejecting specific structures and systems’ (McGranahan 2016, 320). This project of refusal itself fuels proactive participation of the Koya youths in the project which I maintain are part of prefigurative politics: displaying what Jeffrey and Dyson call a ‘self-conscious effort to direct energy into practising in the present the future that is sought’ (Jeffrey and Dyson 2021). The chapter also offers reflections upon my involvement in the IKK project where I consider reciprocity as a possible method to decolonise anthropological fieldwork. I conclude the chapter by discussing how this research project serves as a form of positioning and an envisioning of Koya identity in India.

1.8.2 Chapter 3 *Adivasi*: Indigeneity and Activism in Koya Identity

In this chapter, I examine how *Adivasi* is equated to indigeneity and its deployment by the Koyas as a political term in the spheres of activism and politics. First, I discuss the term ‘Adivasi’ and its place in recent debates over indigeneity in India. I then examine the work of Tudum Debba, an organisation that purports to fight for the rights of *Adivasis* in Telangana. I elaborate on how the articulation of *Adivasi* as Indigenous animates their activism and forms their notion of a better future for tribal communities. Next, I present a case study on Arjun, a Tudum Debba leader, and his first foray into the realm of politics as a candidate in the 2018 elections. This participation in politics represents a shift in Arjun’s style of activism, from

attending rallies against the policies of the Indian State as a Tudum Debba activist, to organising election rallies as a candidate for a political party in Telangana. Through participating in his election rallies and observing his electoral campaigns, I have observed an emphasis in his speeches on how the tribal communities should be regarded as *Adivasis* and Indigenous, hence justifying their claims on their lands and demands for state protection of their culture and constitutional rights.

1.8.3 Chapter 4 Scheduled Tribe: Governing Koya Identity

In this chapter, I argue that the term ‘Scheduled Tribe’ is an inextricable articulation of Koya identity and examine how it governs the lives of the Koyas and the tribal communities in India. Although the term ‘Scheduled Tribe’ is a ‘vague and ambiguous denomination to identify tribal communities of India’ (Bose et al. 2012, 664), the constitutional and legal provisions that are tied in with this term make it indispensable and embedded in Koya identity. I analyse the embeddedness of the term ‘Scheduled Tribe’ by dividing the chapter into three sections. In the first section, I look at the genealogy of the term ‘Scheduled Tribe’ and how it has manifested in the everyday life of the Koyas. Then, I examine how my Koya interlocutors engage in petitioning to defend their constitutional rights and hold the state accountable. In the third and final section, I delve into the *Adivasi*–Lambada rift in Telangana to examine the identity politics that emerge when communities lay contesting claims to being ‘ST’.

1.8.4 Chapter 5 *Jataras* and *Pandugas*: Social Memory and Contestations of Koya Religious Identity

In this chapter, I explore the articulations of Koya religious identity through two Koya festivals, or *Jataras*, ‘Samakka Saralamma Jatara’ and ‘Remakka Relakka Jatara’, and a Koya clan god festival, ‘Karukonda Sadalamma Panduga’. I argue that these Koya festivals serve as sites of social memory and an important conduit for preserving, expressing and authenticating Koya religious identity, as expressed in the term *Koya Punem*, in India today. I also highlight how these festivals differ from each other, and in so doing, show that Koya festivals also serve as arenas of contestation and appropriation. For instance, the biennial Samakka Saralamma *Jatara* which is a major festival for the Koyas is equally influenced by Hinduism in the region. This has led to the commonplace notion that this *Jatara* is in fact a ‘Hindu’ festival and as a corollary, the Koyas are perceived as ‘Hindus’. Reconciling the two perspectives has generated tensions

and debate over whether Koya festivals are part of the Hindu fold and how do they lend themselves to larger issues concerning the religious identity of the Koyas.

1.8.5 Chapter 6 *Vanavasi*: Assimilation of Koya Identity through *Hindutva*

In this chapter, I discuss how a tribal welfare organisation, VKP, propagates a form of ethno-nationalist ideology, known as *Hindutva*, among the Koyas. From its inception by V. D. Sarvakar in 1928, *Hindutva* is used as a term to denote Hindu nationalism in India and has evolved into an ideology that is likened to ‘ethno-nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and fascism’ (Reddy 2011b, 439). It aims to transform Hindu culture into an undifferentiated whole, expressed as ‘one nation, one people, one culture’ (Khilnani 1997, 151), that is, to form a *Hindu Rashtra*. It equates religious identity with national identity, whereby every Indian is defined as a Hindu and the Hindu faith is defined as the core of Indian nationhood (van der Veer 1994, 1). In this chapter, I argue that the VKP goes beyond being a welfare organisation. Rather, it should be viewed as far more capacious and utilitarian in nature in that welfare projects by the VKP serve as conduits to shape Koya identity according to a form of militant Hindu nationalist ideology, known as *Hindutva*. By articulating tribal identity as *Vanavasi* along with focusing on developmental and altruistic work, the VKP is attempting to assimilate the Koyas and, by extension, all tribal communities, into their *Hindutva* ideology.

1.9 Conclusion

I started out my fieldwork with the aim of completing an ethnographic study of activists belonging to two organisations, Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad and Tudum Debba. It was an attempt to make sense of the issues and problems facing the Koyas in India and how these activists are working towards the betterment of the Koyas. However, in the process of doing fieldwork, it became increasingly apparent that activism is inextricably tied in with the narratives of identity that the Koyas articulate in their everyday lives.

Through allocating a chapter to each narrative, this thesis demonstrates how the Koyas develop their own articulation and concurrently integrate other articulations to suit their purposes. It highlights how Koya identity in India continues to shift as it undergoes appropriation and contestation by various stakeholders. It is important to note that although I analyse each of these ethnonyms as separate narratives, these narratives are not distinct from each other. Rather, they are deeply intertwined and entangled. As Lewis P. Hinchman and Sarah K. Hinchman (2001, p. xviii) aptly put it, ‘identity is that which emerges in and through narratives’. Hence,

throughout this thesis, I emphasise that identity is always about narratives and the positions that individuals and communities take with respect to the past, present and future.

Chapter 2: *Koitur*: Decolonising Koya Identity

2.1 Opening Vignette

It was a warm summer morning in June 2018, and during most summers, the village would be in a state of idyllic calm as people stayed in their homes to seek respite from the heat. However, the summer of June 2018 was different for the Koyas of Kamaram. There was a sense of excitement and anticipation in the air as everyone was busy making the final preparations for an important event. This event marked a key milestone for Arjun, my closest friend and key interlocutor. In the summer of 2017, he gathered the youths of the village and formed the Birsa Munda Youth of Kamaram (BMYK). The objective of the BMYK, according to Arjun, was to conduct research on Koya history and culture. Thus, their first project, the IKK project, was aimed at collecting data on various aspects of Koya Indigenous knowledge, such as religion, folklore, oral histories, forest medicine, hunting, and agricultural techniques. After about nine months of intensive data collection, a 300-page book in Telugu, titled *Indigenous Knowledge of the Koitur of Kamaram (IKK)*, was published in 2018.

To commemorate the publication of the book, the BMYK organised a three-day event in Kamaram from June 3rd to 5th, and it far exceeded everyone's expectations. Throughout the three days, Kamaram was packed as people from neighbouring villages, government officials and scholars came for the event. I was particularly impressed by the temporary museum that the BMYK built in the space of a week to display exhibits of agricultural and hunting tools, forest fruits and medicinal plants. Each exhibit was labelled with a handwritten note, and to complement these exhibits, members from the Koya community performed traditional Koya dances (see Figure 2.1) and demonstrated various cooking techniques (see Figures 2.2 and 2.3).



Figure 2.1: Koya Dance Performance



Figure 2.2: Agricultural Tools on Display



Figure 2.3: Distilling Mahua Flowers to Make Liquor

To add to the festivities, the BMYK organised a volleyball tournament and invited youths from neighbouring villages to compete against each other. During the event, the BMYK members were busy ensuring that everything was running smoothly. The youths were given specific tasks, such as ushering visitors, organising the volleyball teams and providing people with information about the exhibits. A stage was set up for invited scholars and government officials to give speeches throughout the three days (see Figures 2.4 and 2.5). When the event ended on the third day, their pride and joy were evident on the faces of the BMYK members as they saw months of their hard work culminating in accolades given by the people who had attended. Their efforts were further rewarded on the final day of the event. The District Collector, a senior

government official, announced that the Tribal Welfare Department, Telangana State, would sponsor the construction of a research centre for the BMYK to continue their research on Koya Indigenous knowledge.



Figure 2.4: Arjun (in a Dark Blue and Red Shirt) Explaining the Exhibits to Government Officials



Figure 2.5: Speech by Author and Activist Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd at the Event

In the evening of the final day of the event, when things were starting to wind down, I asked Arjun why he was willing to invest effort and resources into initiating the IKK project. He replied: ‘We are *Koitur*. Many people have written about us, about our stories and our histories. We want to write our own stories and our own histories and have our own knowledge’. After a

brief pause, he gave me a steely gaze and said: ‘Brother, let’s keep doing this project. We want to do more research on *Koitur* identity and culture’.⁸

2.2 Introduction

In this chapter, I place the IKK project as the focal point of my analysis and chart the following narrative sequence, ‘We were called *Koitur* during the reign of the Gondwana Kings but that has stopped. Through this project, we are claiming to be *Koiturs* and want to tell people about our *Koitur* history and culture’. I suggest that the IKK project is not merely an attempt to preserve or salvage Koya culture. Rather, through the IKK project, the Koyas of Kamaram enact their sovereignty over what constitutes their history and culture. This resonates with the main objectives of the Subaltern Studies project that emerged in the 1980s. The project, which was helmed by Indian scholars, was focused on recovering the voices of the oppressed from the colonial archives.⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, a scholar associated with the project, writes, ‘The human in our anticolonial mode of thinking was a figure of sovereignty. We wanted to make the peasant or the subaltern the subject of his or her history, period’ (2012, 4). Similarly, the IKK project allows the Koyas of Kamaram to make themselves the authors of their history and culture. Moreover, Nilsen and Roy highlight the dynamic nature of subalternity, through which ‘agency arises and develops within and in relation to dominant discourses and political forms’ (2015, 13). To this end, the Koyas of Kamaram are engaged in exercising their agency to forge their own narrative of Koya identity and culture – as they define and produce it - instead of acceding to dominant discourses. This is extended towards addressing losses and erasure as well. The Koyas of Kamaram have largely adopted Telugu and many of the youths do not know the Koya language. However, this does not reflect a narrative of cultural eradication. Firstly, the Koya language is not extinct. There are other Koya communities within Telangana that continue to speak Koya fluently. Secondly, as I will illustrate later, efforts are underway to impart the Koya language to the youth in Kamaram, and in Chapter 4, I discuss the production of a Koya-English dictionary by my host, Santosh, as part of his efforts to preserve the Koya language. These efforts suggest that the Koya language is not entirely lost to the Koyas of Kamaram but rather represents a journey toward reacquiring fluency. Also, as mentioned in the

⁸ The term ‘culture’ is a hotly debated one in anthropology, with its reifying overtones (see Appadurai 1996,12). Here it is used as a noun to note how the Koyas of Kamaram try to claim ownership and authority and delimit the representation of their culture.

⁹ For an overview of the Subaltern Studies project and its critics, see Ludden’s (2002) *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia* and Ranajit Guha’s (1997) *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986–1995*.

introduction, the Koyas of Kamaram are mostly settled agriculturalists. This can be construed as a loss of sovereignty over the forests and a forced transition to land cultivation. However, as I illustrate in the opening vignette, the Koyas of Kamaram have demonstrated their knowledge of the forests through the museum and the exhibitions. This shows that a transition to land cultivation doesn't necessarily result in a form of dissonance. Despite not having official jurisdiction over the forests, their claim to the forests is not necessarily lost and is expressed in terms of their Indigenous knowledge. Hence, this is not to say that they do not deploy definitions and structures available to them across different domains, as evident in the festival and exhibitions, but they pour their own content into these structures to make and celebrate it as their own.

In this chapter, I argue that the IKK project allows the Koyas of Kamaram to articulate *Koitur* as their narrative of Koya identity, and in so doing, to engage in a decolonising endeavour. I begin with a broad discussion of decolonisation and how it pertains to my analysis of the IKK project. Then, I discuss *Koitur* and how it functions as a discursive formation of Koya identity. I detail the inception and execution of the IKK project and maintain that the IKK project represents a form of agency and refusal. In the third section, I delve into the people behind the project, the BMYK members. I focus on their involvement in the IKK project and suggest that the BMYK is engaging in prefigurative politics—a form of youth politics aimed at mobilising people with a particular vision of the future.

The idea of prefigurative politics was best captured recently by Jeffrey and Dyson (2021, 644) in their study of Indian village youths in Uttarakhand. They conceptualised prefigurative politics as a 'self-conscious effort to direct energy into practising in the present the future that is sought' (see also Dyson and Jeffrey 2018). I will elaborate on this aspect later, but for now, I take this to refer to how the BMYK are forging their own narrative on Koya identity and, in so doing, shaping their aspirations for the future. In the final section, I reflect on my own involvement in the IKK project. Through this, I show that collaboration, reciprocity, and dialogue are key elements to consider in thinking about decolonising anthropological research with tribal communities in India. Thus, the IKK project is not limited to being a repository of knowledge, which might help forge an imagined community—through practices and institutions, as the museum mentioned in the previous section illustrates (Anderson 2016). It is also a decolonising endeavour that expresses a refusal of the static notions of tribal identity, the exercise of the agential power and the configuration of the aspirations of the Koyas of Kamaram.

2.3 A Decolonising Endeavour

Before discussing how the Koyas of Kamaram are engaging in a decolonising endeavour via the IKK project, I first establish what I mean by ‘decolonising’. I begin by referring to Tuck and Yang’s (2012) article, ‘Decolonisation is Not a Metaphor’. Tuck and Yang (2012, 3) point out clearly that the ‘easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation’. They argue that decolonisation cannot simply be a catch-all metaphor for resisting colonialism. On using ‘decolonisation’ carelessly, it loses its analytical edge and becomes a mere buzzword, resulting in the lack of a clear definition of what decolonisation entails for Indigenous communities in actionable and practical ways. Tuck and Yang state unreservedly that, rather, decolonisation must involve the repatriation of land from settlers to Indigenous peoples. In other words, this is not simply a discursive exercise, but is instead aimed at practical ends, akin to a social justice project. They conclude that ‘decolonisation is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity’ (Tuck and Yang 2012, 35). In following Tuck and Yang’s point that decolonisation should foreground Indigenous sovereignty, I raise the question of how decolonisation can be understood in the context of Indigenous communities in India. Although land repatriation for these communities might seem like a utopian project, we cannot risk ignoring incipient efforts taken by Indigenous communities to articulate their own narratives over their identity, history, and culture.

Consequently, I maintain that the IKK project is a form of decolonising endeavour. I choose ‘endeavour’ to reflect the incipient efforts of the Koyas of Kamaram in exercising their sovereignty on what constitutes Koya Indigenous knowledge and the potentialities that can emerge from their efforts. According to Sium, Desai and Ritskes (2012, iii), a decolonising project is one that ‘seeks to reimagine and rearticulate power, change, and knowledge through a multiplicity of epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies’. This refers to how power, change and knowledge can emerge from multiple sources. It calls for us to recognise and appreciate diverse forms of knowledge, beings, and values. The IKK project aligns closely with this definition for it captures the efforts by the Koyas of Kamaram to articulate their own ways of knowing and living in the world. It is worth quoting from a recent lecture on the topic of ‘Decolonizing Tribal Studies in India’ by Virginius Xaxa (2021), a member of the Oraon community and a prominent tribal researcher from India:

One of the problems with tribal studies is the concept itself and how tribes are looked at in a colonial social structure. The idea of a tribe was represented as primitive, savages and inferior

beings which continues even today ... If you really want to reclaim or to decolonise tribal studies, then tribes must be seen as a society like any other society.

...ethnography becomes an important methodology. That means you are trying to study or attempting to write from the lens of the tribals, and that is liberating. We have to do a lot of introspection, identify positionality, re-positionality in order to move in the direction of decolonization. Decolonization, therefore, demands from us that we adopt a virtue of thinking which challenges the dominant paradigm or perspective of looking at tribal societies.

Xaxa highlights two key points on decolonisation. First, he raises the question of representation. This speaks to how certain presumptions, or tropes, have tended to create reductive and static representations of tribal societies in India. To debunk these reductive and static representations, we need to recognise that tribal societies are constantly in flux and tribals are continually engaged in exercising their agency in terms of making sense of their cultural practices, meanings, and identity formations.¹⁰ This approach aligns with the IKK project by the Koyas of Kamaram because they are attempting to make sense of and reclaim their cultural and historical landscapes. Xaxa states that ethnographic practice serves as a key methodology for decolonisation. Taking my cue from Xaxa, I argue that the involvement of Koya youths in the IKK project is an example of such ethnographic practice. Even though these youths are not trained ethnographers or anthropologists, they are researchers who are actively collecting materials selectively and interpreting and translating these into multiple publications. Given their participation in knowledge production, they cannot be reduced to mere passive observers, let alone the ‘mute’ subjects of research.

This participation in knowledge production aligns with the work of the late Professor Syed Hussein Alatas, a prominent Southeast Asian academic and sociologist.¹¹ For the past few decades, Professor Alatas was a prominent voice in Southeast Asia in terms of critiquing imperialism and advocating a deep engagement towards decolonisation. He did not simply argue in favour of a nativist approach but, rather, provided a hybrid view that saw utility in Western forms of knowledge (Moosavi 2018, 233). He wrote, ‘As I see it, the problem is not to avoid the Western world of learning but to assimilate it in a selective and constructive manner’ (Alatas, 1974, as cited in Moosavi 2018, 697). Likewise, the Koyas of Kamaram can be seen as adopting anthropological research methods, which are rooted in colonial modes of knowledge (Cohn 1987). Yet, as I will illustrate later, these methods have been assimilated and

¹⁰ I examine these themes in later chapters in which I present how the Koyas navigate and articulate their identity through different terms (*Adivasi*, Scheduled Tribe, *Koya Punem* and *Vanavasi*).

¹¹ Some of his key works include *Thomas Stamford Raffles: Schemer or Reformer* (1971), *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (1997).

appropriated by the Koyas as an expression of agency and a strategy – as Alatas reminds us - and wider refusal to be passive subjects.

Consider, for example, the temporary museum and the book on Koya indigenous knowledge – there are forms of materiality that aim to reshape and represent what it means to be Koya. Daniel Miller (2005) conceives forms of materiality as ranging from the creating of objects, architectural arrangements from temples to buildings, symbolic artefacts such as statues, gods, and dictionaries.

He writes,

For Bourdieu, who wore another cap as a theorist of education, it was these practical taxonomies, these orders of everyday life, that stored up the power of social reproduction, since they in effect educated people into the normative orders and expectations of their society. What we now attempt to inculcate in children through explicit pedagogic teaching, based largely in language, had previously been inculcated largely through material culture (2005,6-7).

Inspired by Miller, I suggest that the temporary museum and the book on Koya Indigenous knowledge are such pedagogic tools aimed at generating knowledge across generations and decolonising Koya identity in the process. Significantly, the IKK project should not be romanticised as a form of resistance, for as I show in the following chapters, there are debates and heterogeneity among the Koyas on how Koya identity is best represented.¹² My characterisation of the IKK project as a decolonising endeavour therefore positions the Koyas of Kamaram as active agents for whom the role of researchers and voices for the community includes assimilating anthropological research methods for their own ends, as evident in material culture.

2.4 *Koitur* as a Discursive Formation of Koya Identity

Having highlighted how the IKK project represents a decolonising endeavour for the Koyas of Kamaram, I now discuss the term *Koitur* and argue that it functions as a discursive formation of Koya identity. Foucault's conceptualisation of discursive formation is instructive:

Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formation (2002, 41).

¹² In the next two chapters, I discuss how other terms, such as *Adivasi* and Scheduled Tribe, resonate with the Koya youths owing to their connections with activism, indigeneity and rights.

In deploying this concept, I refer to how *Koitur* can be unpacked to show how certain statements are placed together to create a discourse of Koya identity. Stuart Hall further interprets Foucault and elaborates on what he sees as the practice of identity formation: ‘identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies’ (Hall and Du Gay 1996, 4). By taking *Koitur* as a discursive formation of Koya identity, I show that it is not merely an archaic term (*Koitur*), but one that is imbued with meaning and aspiration that are enunciated through the IKK project. For Stuart Hall, discourse also ‘governs the way a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about’ (Hall 1996, 346). Put together, Foucault and Hall’s elaboration on discourse and identity are especially productive for piecing together the ways that Koyas are *Koitur* and reclaim and forge their own narrative around how Koya identity should be conceived and represented, an issue I turn to next.

While planning for the IKK project, Arjun insisted that the project and the book title must include the word *Koitur* and not ‘Koya’. When I asked him the reason, Arjun replied, ‘We are *Koiturs*. *Koitur* is our actual name’. His reply reminded me about a conversation with Arjun’s elder brother, Santosh, during my first stint of fieldwork with the Koyas in 2013.¹³ When I mentioned to him that I was interested in understanding Koya culture, he immediately corrected me, saying, ‘Yes, we are Koyas, but the correct term should be *Koitur*. During the time when the Gondwana kings ruled the lands, the people were called *Koitur*. So, the Gonds, Koyas and all the tribals in India are *Koitur*’. At that point, I had assumed that *Koitur* was merely an archaic term for ‘Koya’. However, the conversation with Santosh and Arjun’s insistence on using *Koitur* showed that it is not merely a vestige of the past. Rather, it is an integral articulation of Koya identity and a living past that stretches into the present. This temporality embedded in *Koitur* also highlights how they view their longevity and authenticity as a people whose traditions were maintained despite the vagaries of time. Hence, when Arjun and others choose to foreground this name as their own, they are also implying a whole set of concerns to do with their rich cultural and political pasts. It is very much about how Koyas in Kamaram make sense of and articulate *Koitur* as part of their multiple and shifting identities.

¹³ This refers to my fieldwork for my Master’s in Anthropology at Hyderabad Central University in 2014.

2.5 Colonial Representations of *Koitur*: What Is in the Name?

To gain a clearer picture of the meaning of *Koitur*, I decided to search the colonial and anthropological writings. My interest was piqued when colonial records revealed that tribal communities, such as the Gonds and Koyas, identified themselves with *Koitur*. For example, according to Eyre Chatterton (1916, 6), ‘Not that the name Gond is the name which they have called themselves by; for to themselves they are, and always have been, simply, “*Koitur*”, or “Men”’ (see also Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 53; von Fürer-Haimendorf 1982, 14). However, these accounts are bereft of details about the historical significance of *Koitur* and the rationale behind tribal communities identifying themselves with *Koitur*. These accounts also reflect how they are a product of their time: a colonial project designed to know and manage the subject population. Moreover, the translation of *Koitur* as ‘men’ is vague and does not fully explicate the cultural significance of this term.¹⁴ This is resonant of Charsley’s (1996,18) article ‘what is in the name’ that discusses the concept of untouchability as a form of identification in the 20th century and its consequences in shaping Indian society, in which he states, ‘For the understanding of current developments, the category and its force need to be considered historically in the way attempted here’. Likewise, the following question is raised in considering the historical discourses over *Koitur*: Since *Koitur* is the term that the Gonds and Koyas use to refer to themselves, why is there no further mention of its significance to these communities? The colonial records have shown that Koya is derived from *Koitur*, but there is still a lacuna in terms of the cultural meaning of *Koitur* and how both the Gonds and Koyas are linked to this term.

These concerns about ‘what is in the name’ resonate with Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s description of cultural imperialism, whereby the inclusion of Indigenous views about their own history and identity is left to the colonisers to decipher and determine (2012, 31). The selective inclusion of the views of the Gonds and Koyas on the significance of *Koitur* has effectively obscured any potential insights on the historical relationships between both communities. Furthermore, there is a paucity of details on *Koitur*, which is reflective of what Connerton (2008) describes as a form of ‘repressive erasure’. Similarly, the lack of information on *Koitur* has brought about a rupture because cultural ideologies may be homogenised, historical practices submerged and questions about the identity of the *Koiturs* left unexamined.

¹⁴ Other translations of ‘*Koitur*’ include ‘human beings’ and ‘people’.

Members of the Gond community are equally sensitive to these issues. Poyam, a researcher from the Gond community, observes:

In a stark marker of the history of suppression and successive alienation visited upon the Adivasi groups of central India, the term Gond itself is an outside imposition. The community, which is the second-largest tribal group in the country with a population of over one crore [10,000,000] identifies itself as *Koitur*, which broadly translates as ‘people’ (2019).

Given that the Gonds and Koyas both recognise themselves as *Koiturs*, this term needs to be re-examined beyond its usage as an archaic term for Koya—that is, it calls for an examination of the statement, ‘We are *Koiturs*’, and not ‘We were *Koiturs*’. Similar observations are made in the *IKK* book published by the BMYK, in which *Koitur* is examined, as the following excerpt shows:¹⁵

When the Gondwana kingdoms were present in central India, the people living in Gondwana were known as *Koitur*. Today, there are Gonds in Adilabad and Koyas in Chinthur, Sironcha and Koraput that share the same clan names. ... In Gond hamlets, the elderly people identify themselves as *Koitur*. The younger generations of Gonds and Koyas must come together to realise this and work towards a unified identity (Birsa Munda Youth of Kamaram, 2018, 50).

This short excerpt represents a reclaiming of *Koitur* as a reference to a historical narrative that has ramifications for the present. This historical narrative is an attempt by the BMYK to construct a coherent shared identity between the Gonds and Koyas. In doing so, it reflects the agency of the Koyas as being active participants of history, rather than passive observers.

In colonial and early anthropological writings on the Koyas, they have been described as ‘a tribe inhabiting the hills in the north of the Godāvāri district ... belonging to the Gond family’ (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, 38) and as ‘the southernmost section of the great Gond race’ (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1982, 20). These accounts on Koya identity have largely canonised the way it is understood today, where the Koyas and Gonds are construed as two related but separate entities. There is an important difference between saying that ‘the Koyas are a section of the Gond race’ vis-a-vis ‘the Koyas and Gonds are *Koitur*’. In the latter statement, it points to a sense of a shared identity between the Gonds and Koyas. This shared identity is encapsulated in the rooting of both communities in the history of the Gondwana kingdoms. The Gondwana rule over central India during the 14th to 18th centuries was described as one of ‘autonomous self-rule and great social and economic prosperity’ (Poyam 2019, see also Bhukya 2017).

¹⁵ Excerpt translated by Sravanthi Pantangi.

In seeing themselves as *Koitur*, the Koyas of Kamaram are articulating their own narrative as key actors in a wider historical unfolding. This is especially pertinent because colonial accounts of Koya history are often sparse on details and tend to overlook their presence and role in the wider social and political history of India. Stating that both Gonds and Koyas are *Koiturs* enables the Koyas to make the claim about participating in a valuable past and to thus counteract their rendering as ‘primitives’ that were in need of a civilising project. It allows the Koyas to present a narrative that they were central to a flourishing civilisation, rather than the savage barbarians that they have been portrayed to be.

Apart from creating a narrative of a ‘golden’ past, the identification of Koya identity with *Koitur* has ramifications in the present. According to Bashford, Chakrabarti and Hore (2021, 12), the idea of ‘Gondwanaland’ features strongly in ‘the culture and politics of Indigenous, *adivasi* and aboriginal origin and belonging – the geopolitics of homeland’. This is especially salient in India where Gond leaders and activists have made explicit reference to ancient Gondwanaland to assert their claim to indigeneity. In the 1990s, this evolved into a movement that demanded a separate Gondwana state for the Gond community (Poyam 2019). Patankar (2018) highlights how Gond popular culture and visual art have shaped current narratives of Gondwanaland. In particular, she writes about how these narratives reflect ‘a geological map-making of a deep past toward a revivalist narrative of origin in which Gondwana is imagined as the birthplace of the Gondi people, their ancestral homeland, which later broke into five continents’. By articulating that Koyas and Gonds are *Koitur*, it allows the Koyas to align themselves with this revivalist narrative and lay claim to indigeneity. This too points to the Koyas engaging in a form of strategic essentialism, where *Koitur* as a term is deployed to bolster their identity as an Indigenous community in India, with a rich and celebrated past.

2.5.1 Koitur as Claiming Indigeneity

The title of the IKK project contains the word ‘Indigenous’, which is an explicit claim that as *Koiturs*, they are an Indigenous community. This claim is particularly crucial as India does not officially recognise any community as ‘Indigenous’, preferring to use the term ‘Scheduled Tribes’, which has led to an ongoing debate on whether tribal communities are Indigenous. Scholars such as Bêteille (1998) have argued that the long history of internal movements in India have led to the intermixing of tribal and non-tribal culture, language, and habitat—even if those are loosely defined. This intermixing negates the historical basis for any claims

regarding which tribe is more Indigenous than the others. Still, early on, the anthropologist Verrier Elwin (1943), through his work among tribal communities in India, states:

The aboriginals [tribal people] are the real *swadeshi* [Indigenous] products of India, in whose presence everything is foreign. They are the ancient people with moral claims and rights of thousand years old. They were here first: they should come first in our regard (1943,32).¹⁶

Shrinkhal, a researcher on tribal law in India, summarises the debate as follows: ‘There is no clear-cut answer to this question (of whether tribals are Indigenous or not) and scholars are of divided opinion. The answer depends upon how the term “Indigeneity” is construed’ (2017, 24). Notably, another term, *Adivasi*, is used by tribal communities in central India, including the Koyas, to express their indigeneity. This will be the focus of the next chapter, but for now, I focus on how in using *Koitur*, the Koyas of Kamaram are trying to legitimise their claims to indigeneity, which they define according to several key factors, including the creation of linkages with origin myth, civilisational narratives and archaeology.

In line with Shrinkhal, I suggest that the Koyas’ claim to indigeneity is construed in terms of how they articulate their identity as *Koitur* and the claims they make in the *IKK* book. This book features the story of Pari Kupar Lingo, which is the creation myth of the Gond community, and it states that when the world was created, all human beings had a common identity called *Koitur*.¹⁷ Such claims to a (re)imagined identity are not unique to the Koyas. For example, Assa Doron observes how the Nishad community in Banaras re-interpret classic Hindu texts in a similar fashion to stake their claims for a more dignified status (Doron 2013). They re-write origin myth and publish and circulate it in their caste journals. Similarly, the inclusion of this myth in the book projects the relatedness of the Koyas to the Gonds, emphasising their common identity as *Koiturs*, and reifies their claims as the Indigenous inhabitants of the lands in which they reside. Consider, for example, this short excerpt from the *IKK* book:

In the Harappa civilisation, the homes of the people point towards the East, which resembles how we construct our houses today. If we analyse the seals of the Harappa civilisation, we find female figurines depicting dance forms, fish, bison horn dance and the bullock cart. Some of these seals depict carrying of water in pots, fishes and the figurine of King Biramboyina Raju on his elephant. All these images are integral to *Koitur* culture and society (Birsa Munda Youth of Kamaram 2018, 48–49).

¹⁶ In my conversations with Koya activists and the Koya youths in Kamaram, they knew about Verrier Elwin and agreed with his characterisation of the tribals as the Indigenous people of India.

¹⁷ The legend of Pari Kupar Lingo was recorded in written form by British clergyman and scholar Eyre Chatterton in his 1916 book, *The Story of Gondwana*.

By presenting these links between the Koya culture and the Harappan civilisation, the Koyas of Kamaram are using their research to assert their claims to indigeneity and connection to a prized and widely known past of the subcontinent. Furthermore, there are megalithic dolmens in the forests near Kamaram. As part of the data collection for the *IKK* book, measurements and photos of these dolmens were taken by the BMYK and were presented in the book. Although clear linkages between the Koyas of Kamaram and the people who were buried in these dolmens are lacking, the inclusion of these findings in the book helps in the crafting of a narrative that the existence of their community stretches to prehistoric times, and in so doing, bolsters their claim to indigeneity as the original inhabitants of the land.

It is important to note that these claims to indigeneity made by the Koyas of Kamaram are contentious. When I mentioned that archaeological studies have not shown any conclusive evidence of links between the dolmens and their community, the Koyas of Kamaram insisted that these archaeological studies have neglected their claims. Therefore, they have presented their own findings in the *IKK* book—which they deem more accurate. This is also reflective of how the past is often subject to debates, and in more abstract terms, how indigeneity in India is a contested concept, whereby its definition might differ, depending on the claimants and the nature of the claim. Appadurai (1981, 203) observes that there are ‘culturally variable sets of norms whose function is to regulate the inherent debatability of the past’. In this case, the combination of myths with physical objects (materiality), such as the dolmens, has allowed the Koyas to anchor their claims in historical and geological time as objective. They view this approach as an effective strategy for gaining recognition as Indigenous. The audience for such claims in this case is equally important, for it is published in a book that is distributed and celebrated in multiple venues. During the event, copies of the book were presented to government officials from the Tribal Welfare Department and TCRTI, university professors and research scholars from various institutes of higher learning, and to Gond and Koya elders. Their findings and the book itself are forms of materiality in the sense discussed by Miller (2005). As such, it creates a sense of legitimacy surrounding the research by the BMYK and reinforces their claims to indigeneity.

Hence, *Koitur* serves as a discursive formation of Koya identity in two ways. First, it creates a shared identity with the Gonds, which presents a narrative of a celebrated past as an articulation of a claim to indigeneity. This allows the Koyas to engage in a form of strategic essentialism (Spivak 1996, 214) to bolster their identity as an Indigenous community in India. Having shown how *Koitur* is an important narrative of Koya identity, I now turn to how the Koyas make sense

of what it means to be *Koitur*, looking at the inception, execution and future of the *Indigenous Knowledge of the Koitur of Kamaram* project.

2.6 The IKK Project: Inception, Execution and Future

In this section, I first describe the inception of the IKK project and its development into a collaboration between a Singaporean Chinese anthropologist (myself) and the Koyas of Kamaram. Pandian and McLean (2017, 1) observe that ‘an ethnography carries beings of one world into another one’. Similarly, it was my attempt at conducting ethnographic research for a Master’s in Anthropology at the Hyderabad Central University that carried me into the world of the Koyas of Kamaram in 2013. As already mentioned in the introduction, part of the course requirements at the time was to conduct a group ethnography among the Koyas, and the village of Kamaram was chosen as our field site. This led to my first interaction with Arjun and the youths of Kamaram. When Arjun observed how my fellow classmates and I conducted our fieldwork, he became interested in anthropological research methods and the ways in which it can be employed to preserve and propagate Koya Indigenous knowledge. This led to conversations between Arjun and me as the idea of conducting a research project on Koya Indigenous knowledge slowly percolated. In early 2017, the plans for the IKK project were finalised and was divided into two phases. Phase 1 was designed to be a pilot test with three clear objectives. First, the pilot test was modelled after the group ethnography conducted in 2013, but the key difference is that the Koya youths in Kamaram were the ones deciding the forms of knowledge to include. Second, it was to introduce the Koya youths of Kamaram to basic anthropological research methods by requiring them to collect data for an eight-month period. Third, all the information was to be collated and a book was to be published in the Telugu language in 2018. With these three objectives in mind, Arjun informed the elders of the village and raised funds to purchase equipment (camera, notebooks, stationery and recording devices) for the IKK project.

2.6.1 Execution of the IKK Project: Phases 1 and 2

With support from the village elders and the families in Kamaram, Phase 1 of the IKK project began in June 2017 and was targeted to end by June 2018. The first order of business was the formation of the Birsa Munda Youth of Kamaram (BMYK), and its membership comprised youths from the village. Led by Arjun and some of the older youths, the BMYK began the initial groundwork for the project. As the formation of BMYK coincided with the summer

holidays, there were sufficient manpower and resources for the data collection phase of the IKK project. Even though I was not physically there, I assisted Arjun by providing guidance on research methods and clarifying any doubts via WhatsApp messages and phone calls. For the first week, Arjun gave a short briefing on basic anthropological research methods and listed down the various topics that required extensive data collection. The BMYK, which numbered about 20 members, was then divided into teams of four or five members each. Each team selected a topic of Koya Indigenous knowledge to cover, for example, rituals and customs, forest medicine, and agricultural techniques.

After the first week of training and orientating the BMYK on anthropological research methods, Arjun held daily meetings with the BMYK, once in the morning and another in the evening (see Figure 2.6). The morning meetings were focused on delegating tasks and discussing the topics given to each team. The evening meetings were mainly focused on resolving problems or issues encountered during the data collection. For about eight months starting from June 2017, each team went about recording oral histories, writing copious amounts of fieldnotes, taking photos and collecting specimens of forest fruits and medicine. After about eight months of data collection, the contents of the *IKK* book were finalised by Arjun and BMYK, and as described in the opening vignette, culminated in the book launch held in June 2018.



Figure 2.6: Morning Meetings with the BMYK

Following the successful book launch in June 2018 and the pledging of support from the Tribal Cultural Research and Training Institute (TCRTI), Arjun and the BMYK proceeded with the second phase of the IKK project, which coincided with my fieldwork phase in late 2018. For

Phase 2, we set three objectives, namely, deepening the repository of Koya Indigenous knowledge, translating, and publishing the *IKK* book in English, and encouraging other tribal communities to conduct research on Indigenous knowledge. To accomplish the first objective, we continued the daily meetings and decided to make field trips to places outside Telangana that hold historical and cultural significance for the Koyas. These field trips facilitated the deepening of the knowledge repository of Koya Indigenous knowledge through the collection of oral histories and the uncovering of linkages with other *Adivasi* communities in the region.

For example, in September 2019, we embarked on a field trip to the Kachargadh Caves in Maharashtra, a site of cultural significance to the Gonds, and met with Gond elders (see Figure 2.7). This meeting facilitated the sharing of perspectives on the common heritage and histories between the Gond and Koya communities (see Figure 2.8). An interesting insight from the meeting was learning about the Gond deity Pahandi Pari Kupar Lingo and his role in establishing the *Koya Punem*, an animist religion practised by both Gond and Koya communities (Kabeer et al. 2019, 18; see also Poyam 2019). This meeting provided a deeper understanding of Koya religion and illustrated how the Koyas possess their own forms of religious practices and should not be cast as ‘backward Hindus’ (Ghurye 1963). Thus, through field visits and collecting dynamic oral histories, new insights about Koya culture have been revealed and are reshaping the narratives of what constitutes Koya identity. The second objective of Phase 2 of the *IKK* project was to translate the *IKK* book into English and supplement it with information gathered from the field trips. The decision to translate the *IKK* book into English was a strategic one because it facilitated accessibility to people both inside and outside India. That is, the book can be read by state actors or translational NGOs who do not possess knowledge of Telegu. Such considerations are viewed as key to highlighting the needs and plight of the Koyas in India beyond the restricted locale. This objective ties in with the third one, namely, encouraging tribal communities themselves to conduct research on Indigenous knowledge.



Figure 2.7: Field Trip to Kachargadh Caves



Figure 2.8: Meeting with Gond Elders (in Yellow Scarves)

Prior to embarking on Phase 2 of the IKK project, we decided to evaluate the IKK project. Two main concerns were raised in this evaluation. The first was the reliance on oral narratives, and issues around truth and representation. From the onset of the project, we recognised the need to collect oral narratives from the Koya elders for they were perceived as the custodians of Indigenous knowledge. We were cognisant that there might be discrepancies and inaccuracies in these narratives. However, we realised that these narratives allowed the Koyas to critically reflect on their histories and generate conversations around how Indigenous knowledge is constituted and distributed. We were careful not to make any claims that this book is the sole

authority on Koya knowledge. Rather, our intention was to contribute to this growing body of knowledge. The reader might observe the ‘we’ or plural used in this section, which is designed to highlight that I was an active participant in this project, helping with advice about methodologies and ethnographic work. Of course, I was not the sole source of knowledge, but was fortunate enough to have an engaged and applied sense of what anthropological work can offer particular communities, rather than be seen as extractive in nature—a criticism often levelled at the discipline (see Burman 2018). At the same time, I was very much aware that here is a project that deploys ethnographic methods not for the purposes of peer review or an aspiration towards a certain degree of objectivity. Rather, it was meant for a particular end – set by a cultural and political agenda to portray the BMYK as researchers of Koya Indigenous knowledge.

Our second area of concern was the recognition that the BMYK members were not trained ethnographers or oral historians. The training provided to them by both me and Arjun was basic, and the time available to conduct the training sessions was limited, which inevitably affected the quality of the data collection. Yet, there were benefits in allowing the BMYK to be directly involved in the data collection process. It provided an excellent learning experience for the BMYK members and showed them what it meant to be a researcher focused on one’s own culture. As a corollary, it created a sense of pride because the Koya youth participants could gain a deeper understanding of their own culture (however defined) through their own efforts. Our discussion also included the impact and future of the IKK project. As presented in the opening vignette, the book launch event was a resounding success and resulted in two key effects. First, it has generated much publicity about the BMYK and the IKK project. The *IKK* book has been placed in the TCRTI library and copies have been disseminated to university libraries in Hyderabad, the capital of Telangana (with an estimated population of 10 million people). Following reports in regional newspapers on the event, tribal scholars from different parts of Telangana have begun to initiate conversations with Arjun and the BMYK on preserving and propagating Indigenous knowledge in Telangana.

The second key impact was the construction of a small building in the village. In recognising the importance and effects of the IKK project, the Tribal Welfare Department, Telangana State, provided funds to construct a building that will serve as a research centre for the BMYK. It will be used to facilitate future BMYK meetings and as a focal point for further research and educational activities, including the teaching of the Koya language and research on forest medicines and Koya history. At the point of writing this thesis, the construction of a community

hall has been completed and the English translation of the *IKK* book is undergoing revision. Here, I recall Miller's point on materiality (2005) where objects play a key role in shaping our lifeworlds. Similarly, the building and the *IKK* book are a temple of knowledge about the Koyas and shaping the Koyas of Kamaram to be researchers in their own right.

The global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic led to a suspension of research activity in 2020. However, in 2021, the BMYK initiated research projects of a smaller scale on forest medicines, myths, religion, and rituals. The construction of the research centre was also completed in 2021, and it has been fully equipped with books and other amenities. There are upcoming plans to teach the Koya language and to organise talks on Koya Indigenous knowledge in 2021. Thus, the *IKK* project continues to be a platform for the Koyas to develop their insights on Koya Indigenous knowledge. It also allows them to be active participants in reclaiming knowledge and power over representation of their own cultural worlds.

2.7 *IKK* Project as Agency and Refusal

Let me now move to the second component that makes the *IKK* project a decolonising endeavour for the Koyas of Kamaram. In this section, I argue that this project is more than an attempt at cultural and heritage preservation. Rather, the *IKK* project represents a form of agency and refusal for the Koyas of Kamaram. The anthropologist Sherry Ortner's notion of agency is instructive:

In one field of meaning 'agency' is about intentionality and the pursuit of (culturally defined) projects. In the other field of meaning agency is about power, about acting within relations of social inequality, asymmetry, and force. In fact 'agency' is never merely one or the other (2006,139).

This theorising of agency resonates strongly with both the inception and the execution of the *IKK* project. This project is intentional in addressing the desire of the Koyas to make sense of their identity on their own terms. It recognises how others have appropriated and misused their knowledge. It also signals a clear desire to go beyond merely salvaging the cultural heritage of the Koyas. It is an intent to reclaim what constitutes the Indigenous and distinctive knowledge of the Koyas and, in doing so, to foreground their own perspectives and narratives. It is an exercise of power too, for it is they who retain control over what constitutes Koya Indigenous knowledge and their expression of Koya identity.

The *IKK* project also aligns with the second field of meaning, where agency is about acting against power within relationships marked by uneven social relations. As mentioned in the first

chapter, tribal communities in India continue to be viewed through a civilising discourse and placed in an asymmetrical relationship through which they continue to be marginalised and infantilised by state policies and actors. In initiating the IKK project, Arjun and the BMYK have sought to redress this marginalisation by rejecting the civilising discourse and formulating their own narrative of what it means to be Koya through this project.

This brings me to the second aspect of the IKK project where I draw from Carole McGranahan's (2016) theorising of refusal as an ethnographic concept and practice. Two aspects of refusal resonate with my analysis of the IKK project. First, McGranahan describes refusal as generative where 'refusal might be thought of as a stoppage, an end to something, the breaking of relations ... however, the ending of one thing is often the generation of something new' (2018, 322). Through the IKK project, the BMYK is refusing to acquiesce to the current discourses and is generating new insights into different aspects of Koya life. Indian and foreign scholars have conducted considerable research on the links between the Gond and Koya communities in India (von Fürer-Haimendorf and Elizabeth von Fürer-Haimendorf 1943, 2021; von Fürer-Haimendorf, 1982; Yadav, 1970). Yet, there has been little research on how these communities make sense of their shared linkages and how it affects their sense of identity. The field trip to Kachargadh Caves in Maharashtra and meeting with the Gond elders allowed the Koyas to understand their shared heritage with the Gonds and create future opportunities to examine these linkages in greater detail. Further, it allowed them the forging of new epistemologies, and to creatively articulate linkages from their distinctive perspectives. These insights represent the generative aspect of the IKK project when Koya perspectives are placed at the forefront and in a position to be open to regeneration and innovative interpretation.

Mohawk anthropologist Simpson notes that, 'within Indigenous contexts, when the people we speak of speak for themselves, their sovereignty interrupts anthropological portraits of timelessness, procedure, and function that dominate representations of their past and, sometimes, their present' (2014, 97). Likewise, I suggest that the IKK project has interrupted the static external representations of Koya in India. It re-presents Koya by destabilising colonial and state-based interpretations and thus facilitates the sovereignty of Koya perspectives and deepens the understanding of Koya histories, myths, and religion.

Of course, all knowledge production is mediated—and anthropological research and methods are one such filter. Yet the ability to deploy this filter and manipulate it is an indication of agency by the tribal communities by asserting their claims and forging an imagined community

in the Andersonian sense. As mentioned in the opening vignette, the temporary museum and its physical exhibits are testament to the depth, complexities, and innovation of Koya knowledge. It demonstrates that this group of Koyas are not merely research subjects; rather, they are capable of being researchers that generate and distribute knowledge through their language and by printing books, or in institutions such as museums and youth movements.

McGranahan adds another dimension to this project of refusal – hope. According to him, ‘hope combines with will to refuse authorized anticipations, thus moving away from the probable into the possible. The wilful aspect of refusal brings us back to transformation and generation, to the possibility of acting to spark change’ (2016, 323). For the Koyas of Kamaram, this means embarking on a research project to build on existing knowledge while uncovering new aspects of Koya Indigenous knowledge. It creates further scaffolding for building a material culture, one that ‘exists not [only] through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us’ (Miller 2005, 5). Think of the published book which is not merely a record of Koya Indigenous knowledge; rather it allows for the possibility for the Koyas to understand what it means to hold that rich identity and heritage, subverting what is of the degrading and diminishing effects of elite historiography.

Hence, I suggest that participation in the IKK project cultivates a sense of what it means to be a Koya, a realisation that their cultural past and present are to be celebrated, and that the term *Koitur* is more than just a historical term. Learning about their Indigenous knowledge through participating in research opens opportunities for Koya youth to engage in deepening their cultural knowledge and in forging a sense of Koya identity, and to strategically deploy such knowledge to their own ends. It provides them the capability to decide how they want to fashion themselves as tribals in India. It allows for the possibility for others, especially the Indian State (however loosely defined), to appreciate Koya Indigenous knowledge and use it in future policy planning.

2.8 Engaging in Prefigurative Politics

Having discussed how the IKK project serves as an expression of agency and a form of refusal for the Koyas of Kamaram, I turn my attention to the people behind the execution of the IKK project, the members of BMYK. Prior to the establishment of BMYK, the youths in Kamaram were already a tightly knit group, largely owing to the close ties between the families in the village. They would play volleyball in the evenings, hunt in the forests, fish in the rivers and

carry out paddy planting and harvesting during the seasons. At festivals or important events, such as funerals and weddings, the youths would be the ones preparing the food, putting up the tentages and helping to ensure the smooth running of the events. When Arjun proposed the formation of the BMYK, the youths responded with much enthusiasm. After some discussions with the village elders, the BMYK was formed in 2017 and that led to their subsequent involvement in the IKK project.

In this section, I focus on the BMYK and argue that their involvement in the IKK project represents an engagement which we might call as ‘prefigurative politics’. According to Jeffrey and Dyson, prefigurative politics is the investment of efforts and resources to create reimagined possibilities of the future in ‘circumstances characterised by power, hierarchy, and conflict’ (2021, 643). When the BMYK conduct research on what it means to be *Koitur*, they establish themselves as researchers and knowledge producers. It is a reimagination of Koya identity that is not restricted by the tropes of primitivism and backwardness, which are commonly associated with tribal communities in India. Moreover, this reimagination of Koya identity serves to empower other aspects of Koya identity and opens up new possibilities of being Koya in India. For example, when they research Koya religion, or *Koya Punem*, it deepens their understanding of Koya religious practices and paves the way for tribal religion to be recognised in future censuses.

I present a short vignette as an example of the BMYK’s engagement in prefigurative politics. On our way back from the fieldtrip to Kachargadh Caves in Maharashtra, we stopped at a small town for a break. We had already been on the road for about eight hours, and our bodies were sore from sitting in a cramped vehicle. While sipping a much-needed *chai*, I turned to Shanti, one of the BMYK youths, and asked her how she felt about the trip. She said: ‘I am tired, but this is a good project. I am learning so much about my own culture and history, about what is *Koitur*’. As I pondered over her comment, I realised that the youths were not merely collecting data for a research project. There was an intentionality that drove these youths to invest their time and effort during their summer holidays. For most youths, the summer holidays are a time for relaxation. Yet, these youths were busy attending meetings, going on long field trips and carrying time-consuming fieldwork. Furthermore, by being involved in the process of data collection, they were able to ask questions and develop a deeper understanding of their culture and acquired the ability to influence how it might be interpreted or represented.

Following the resounding success of the IKK project, the BMYK began to organise more activities in the village. On 9 August 2018, the BMYK celebrated International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples in Kamaram. At about 9am, the BMYK gathered in front of the *boddurai* (A place of worship in the centre of Koya villages; important meetings and discussions pertaining to villages matters are often held there). There was a small flagpole, and on it, the Gondwana flag was hoisted (see Figure 2.9). A picture of Birsa Munda was placed on a chair, and the village elders and some members of the BMYK paid homage to Birsa Munda by smashing some coconuts in front of the picture (see Figure 2.10). Soon after, Arjun gave a short speech to conclude the celebration. The following is a short excerpt from his speech, which has been translated from Telugu:¹⁸

Friends, let us know our *Koitur* history and culture, with the flag as a proof of our own culture and existence. We are proud to fly this flag in our land and convey the importance of this day to the rulers of this state and the people of this country. Let us be united; let us strive to pass on the rights enshrined in the Constitution of India to our future generations.

The contents of the speech emphasised the need for the Koyas of Kamaram to see themselves as *Koitur* and to amplify the idea of a distinct Indigenous culture. Alongside this claim to indigeneity, there is also a call for unity and an assertion of constitutional rights. Thus, it is not merely a celebration of indigeneity, but a reminder that as Indigenous people, they, like many other Indigenous groups worldwide, must assert their identity and their rights.



Figure 2.9: Hoisting of the BMYK Flag

Figure 2.10: Paying Homage to Birsa Munda

¹⁸ The speech was translated by Sravanthi Pantangi.

Although the celebration lasted for only an hour and was mostly attended by the people in the village, it was a significant moment for the BMYK. This was the first time that the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples was celebrated in Kamaram. Here, I turn to Don Handelman's analysis of Israel's Holocaust Day, Remembrance Day, and Independence Day. He observes how the deliberate calendrical scheduling of these three days create a 'lineal encoding of time created a certain narrative structure, one that is sequential, generating story-lines that are cumulative and climactic' (Handelman 1990,223). Similarly, by celebrating the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples on August 9th, the BMYK are creating a narrative structure. This narrative structure is expressed as statements like. 'The state does not recognise us as Indigenous. But we demand to be recognised as *Koiturs*, as Indigenous people of India. We celebrate the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples to show that we are Indigenous'. Here, the Koyas are portraying *Koitur* as a narrative of Koya identity and has drawn on transnational organisations and the global calendar to bolster its legitimacy. This strategic alignment and reification are manifested in two ways. The first is through the raising of the Gondwana flag. In flying this flag – a powerful expression of material culture –, the Koyas are claiming their roots in Gondwanaland, a pre-national mode of belonging and a representation of an Indigenous past. it reiterates their alignment with the revivalist narrative as presented in the earlier section. It reminds them that they are *Koitur* and one with the Gonds and are Indigenous in India.

In his book about the boatmen of Banaras, Doron (2010, 59) highlights the role of community associations formed by them to 'articulate their collective rights and resist state intervention and oppression ... in a thoroughly modern language that is anchored in the principles of social justice, equal rights and political participation'. In a similar fashion, the Koyas are deploying Indigeneity as part of their identity and relating it to the global discourse of Indigenous rights and culture. This allows them to tap into the themes of social justice and equality, which are crucial elements for a better future for the Koyas. Hence, by being *Koitur*, they are not just concerned about the past, but are also shaping their notion of a future as Indigenous peoples of India.

The second way in which this strategic alignment and reification are manifested is in the use of Birsa Munda's portrait for the event and in naming the organisation after Birsa Munda, which reflect an aspirational desire of the BMYK. To put this in context, a brief background of a revered tribal hero in India, Birsa Munda is given. Birsa was from the Munda tribal community that resided in the Chhotanagpur Plateau, near present-day Jharkhand. To protect the tribals

from unjust land laws, he organised a rebellion against the British, which became known as the *Birsa Ulgulan* (meaning tumult or rebellion) (Ranjit Guha 1999). The rebellion was so impactful that the British passed laws to protect tribal land. I asked Arjun why he used the name of Birsa Munda, who was from a different tribe, and not the name of a famous Koya hero, such as Komaram Bheem. Arjun replied that Birsa Munda is a role model as he fought for the rights of tribal communities. It was the second half of his reply that caught me off guard. He added, 'Birsa Munda is also a *Koitur* and the hero for all the *Koiturs* in India'. His stating that Birsa Munda is a *Koitur* reveals that this claim to indigeneity is relevant not just for the Koyas and Gonds, but for all tribal communities in India. This strategy of creating new narratives around heroes is not unique to the Koyas of Kamaram. As Narayan (2001) and Doron (2010a, 775–9) show, other communities, such as the Dalits and Nishads in Uttar Pradesh, have created alternative interpretations of myths and heroes that highlight their own community figures as central figures in the project of India's independence. Doing so allows these communities to critique oppressive Brahminical ideologies, create new narratives of their social identity, and use these narratives to mobilise action.

Through their involvement in the IKK project and initiating events such as these, the BMYK is creating its narrative of what it means to be Koya in India. In my interactions with the BMYK members, I am often struck by their keenness to learn about their culture and history. They take much pride and joy in their involvement with the project and being part of the BMYK. It cultivates in them a sense of what it means to be a Koya, a realisation that their culture and identity is not inferior. It provides them the capability to decide how they want to fashion themselves as Koyas in India. It is a form of political activism as they imagine themselves to be part of the larger global Indigenous community. As they continue to engage in research, it is an engagement in prefigurative politics that empowers other aspects of their identity and orients the Koyas towards a reimagined future in which tribal communities in India are not defined by anachronistic tropes.

2.9 Reciprocity as Method

I want to further reflect on my involvement and positionality as a fieldworker in the IKK project. Through this process, collaboration, reciprocity, and dialogue became key elements in both fieldwork and in considering what I describe as decolonising anthropological research with tribal communities in India. As mentioned earlier, I was conducting ethnographic research

for my thesis while collaborating with Arjun and the BMYK on Phase 2 of the IKK project. Here, I am reminded of Smith's writing about the researcher:

Researchers are in receipt of privileged information. They may interpret it within an overt theoretical framework, but also in terms of a covert ideological framework. They have the power to distort, to make invisible, to overlook, to exaggerate and to draw conclusions, based not on factual data, but on assumptions, hidden value judgements, and often downright misunderstandings. They have the potential to extend knowledge or to perpetuate ignorance (2012, 178).

As an anthropologist, I am cognisant that my collaboration with Arjun and the BMYK on the IKK project results in the extension of knowledge and meaning making for them, as much as it can be construed as merely an extractive process to fulfil the requirements of my PhD course. This duality calls for a reflexive stance and recognition that both the IKK project and the PhD thesis are products of the collaboration between me, my co-author Arjun and the BMYK. It forced me to consider how anthropologists and fieldworkers can engage in a form of reciprocal fieldwork, instead of merely extracting data from interlocutors. Fieldwork was therefore fertile ground for reflecting on the aspects of reciprocity and dialogue that formed the main elements of our collaboration.

Let me elaborate by first focusing on the aspect of reciprocity, which I believe must extend beyond the need of maintaining good relationships with Arjun and the BMYK by providing 'informal assistance' (Ellen 1984, 139). Vineeta Sinha (2021, 270), an anthropologist researching on Hinduism in Southeast Asia, offers relevant reflections, 'The human dimension of fieldwork and responsibility to social relationships are priorities in ethnographic research and writing. Acknowledging that fieldwork is a collaborative effort reflects these commitments.' Reciprocity, in my case, was constructed as a form of relatedness whereby the researcher is an active contributor, who leverages on anthropological training and contributes to the community. Such was my experience working on the IKK project by guiding the BMYK in basic research methods. It is also a recognition that Arjun and the BMYK are not passive research subjects in my PhD research, but partners in the co-production of knowledge.

My participation in the IKK project allowed me to see what it meant to adapt and blend ways of thinking when relating to Arjun and the BMYK. For example, as someone who has received training in anthropology in Australia and Singapore, I have my own perspectives on how to execute a research project. Typically, a non-Indigenous PhD project does not make a tangible impact on the life of the community within which the researcher works. There may be some short-term benefits to the *researched*, such as access to a vehicle, various forms of payment and

new friendships made—but the research output of a PhD thesis does not in itself influence community life. Conversely, this PhD project was materially different. While working with the BMYK, I was cognisant that what matters here is not whether I had enough *data* for my research or whether the *data* were collected in an academically acceptable or timely fashion. Rather, it is to recognise that the IKK project matters to them and that they are not merely research subjects—they are researchers with a clear and explicit cultural agenda to advance their cause.

This leads me to the second point, which is the need for open dialogue. Here, I take our daily meetings as an example. Apart from ensuring that the project was on the right track, these meetings played an important role in facilitating a free-flowing dialogue between us and the BMYK. The meetings created a space where everyone could discuss the challenges or issues they faced, provide new ideas and brainstorm solutions as a collective. It was also a space where members freely expressed their joys and frustrations. This allowed every member to feel that their ideas were valued and that they were equal partners. Of course, one should not romanticise the process, for there were debates and contestations, some of which I was not privy to, but the overall project functioned in this collaborative fashion.

2.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how the Koya youths in Kamaram have initiated a research project to articulate their narrative of identity, history, and culture through the term *Koitur*. I described this project as a form of decolonising endeavour and a form of strategic essentialism. I used ‘endeavour’ to reflect the incipient efforts of the Koya youths in exercising their sovereignty on what constitutes Koya Indigenous knowledge. I delved into how *Koitur* constitutes a discursive formation of Koya identity, which formed two intertwining themes. The first theme focused on the assertion of a shared history and identity of the Gonds and the Koyas. This assertion served as a form of strategic essentialism that bolsters their claims for a separate Gondwana state. The second theme emerged as an assertion that allows the Koyas to bolster their claim to indigeneity through research. By putting together their creation myth and archaeological findings, such an assertion presented a coherent narrative that the Koyas can confidently claim to Indigenous to India, with temporal depth (as the Gondwanaland inhabitants) and spatial reach (as part of a global and transnational Indigenous network).

Having dealt with how *Koitur* constituted a discursive formation of Koya identity, I detailed the inception and execution of the IKK project. I argued that the IKK project represents a form

of agency and refusal. The agency is manifested in the intent of the Koyas to reclaim what constitutes their knowledge and to foreground their own perspectives and narratives. As for refusal, the IKK project allows the Koyas to refuse static notions of tribal identity imposed by the state and to forge their own narratives. I then focused on the participation of the Koya youths in this project as a form of prefigurative politics. Last, I reflected on my involvement and positionality as a fieldworker in the IKK project. Through this process, I showed that collaboration, reciprocity and dialogue are key elements to consider in thinking about decolonising anthropological research with tribal communities in India.

In conclusion, I refer to Smith's description of research as 'an intellectual, cognitive and moral project, often fraught, never complete, but worthwhile' (2012, 215). The IKK project embodied this quotation for it requires the Koyas to invest much intellectual and physical labour. It was fraught with difficulties at times. But to the Koyas, it was worthwhile since they believed that such actions would contribute to preserving their heritage, which they define and claim as *Koitur*. Pandian outlines a vision of a possible anthropology that is 'adequate to the challenge of seeing and thinking beyond the profound fissures and limits of the present' (2019, 14) and describes critique, a key component of a possible anthropology, as an 'art or practice of prising open the fixity of what is present and keeping it open ... as a means of tending an open horizon, though, is to proceed in an affirmative rather than negative manner' (2019, 118).

For the BMYK, the IKK project represented a form of thinking beyond the limits of the present and as affirmative critique. In documenting their knowledge, they engaged in a prefigurative project that creates the possibility of delimiting Koya identity and injects dynamism, instead of perpetuating static notions of tribal communities trapped in tropes of primitivism and backwardness. As I reflect on the current situation in India, where resource rich tribal areas are subject to powerful forces, which inject further instability into tribal communities, it is more crucial than ever that tribal communities protect and sustain their ways of living. Of course, tribal communities have always been exposed to 'external' influences, they did not operate in a vacuum – neither economic nor social. Yet the scale and speed of change is different (see Sundar 2016b, 33), leading many communities to take action. The IKK project served as an example for other tribal communities who strive to claim ownership of their knowledge, and for creating new discourses on what constitutes tribal identity to pave the way to envisioning a better future for marginalised tribal communities in India.

Chapter 3: Adivasi: Indigeneity and Activism in Koya Identity

3.1 Opening Vignette

On the morning of 9 August 2018, I was waiting in my hostel room at the University of Hyderabad. A couple of days prior, Divya, a Koya student from this university, had informed me that the Koya students and students from other tribal groups were due to celebrate the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples on 9 August. In her words, ‘There will be a big celebration, you please come. It will start around late morning’. At around 11 am, I walked to the university auditorium and was a bit puzzled for it was quiet. Some students were milling around, but it was not quite the ‘big celebration’ that I expected. As I waited at the steps of the auditorium, it dawned on me that this must be another instance of the ‘fluidity of time’ in India, where events rarely start on time but, rather, as one of the students told me, start ‘in time’. I waited for another hour and tried to call Divya, but she was uncontactable. At around noon, I gave up waiting and decided to head back to my hostel for lunch. As I made my way back, my phone rang, and I heard Divya’s voice over the cacophony of drums and raucous cheering. She said, ‘Brother, where are you? Please come to Osmania University now. Celebrations are happening here’. As this university was about 30 km away, I immediately called for a cab. After weaving through Hyderabad’s atrocious traffic for about an hour, I arrived at the university campus and met Divya who brought me to the auditorium where the event was being held (see Figure 3.1). Upon reaching the auditorium, I saw about 150 tribal students watching a tribal dance performance in rapt attention (see Figure 3.2).



Figure 3.1: Event Banner of the World Indigenous Peoples Day at Osmania University



Figure 3.2: Tribal Dance Performance by Koya Students at Osmania University

As the only foreigner, I was quickly ushered to the front row and given a seat beside the Osmania University professors, who, I later learned, were also Koyas. After the dance performance, one of the professors went on stage to give a short speech on the importance of protecting the Adivasis' culture and heritage. After concluding his speech, the professor looked at me intently and invited me onto the stage to say a few words. I tried to decline for I had arrived late to the event and wanted to quietly observe. However, since all eyes were on me and the emcee was announcing my name, I went up the stage and quickly improvised a short speech. I thanked them for inviting me and commended the performances by the students. I ended my speech with 'Jai Adivasi!' (translates to 'Victory to Adivasis!', which is a rallying cry that serves as affirmation and motivation for the Adivasis), which was immediately met with boisterous applause.



Figure 3.3: Elvin Giving a Brief Speech at an Event

After I left the stage, the emcee asked everyone on the auditorium to stand and recite a pledge in Telugu, which has been translated by me and appended below. The pledge was recited with much gusto, and that marked the end of the day's proceedings.

Pledge

I am proud that I am an *Adivasi*. Upholding my heritage, culture, traditions, customs, living a life of togetherness, excelling in academic and professional arenas, maintaining the traditional systems to rebuild Adivasi society with complete sincerity. As an *Adivasi*, I pledge to sincerely perform my duties and pledge to take forward my fellow brothers and sisters in this process of development. *Jai Adivasi! Jai Jai Adivasi!*

In saying the pledge on the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, the *Adivasi* students were asserting their intent to be recognised as the Indigenous peoples of India. A closer examination of the pledge shows that it highlighted the themes of unity, pride, heritage and development, which are also echoed in the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007). Here, I draw on Handelman's analysis on events, namely that 'Events that re-present are like multiple or magic mirrors that play with forms of order – that refract multiple visions of the possible, from among whose uncertainties there re-emerge probabilities' (1990, 49). The inaugural celebration on the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples is a reflection on what it means to be *Adivasi* in India, which in this case, means an alignment with indigeneity.

When I was informed by Divya that they would henceforth celebrate it on August 9th every year in Osmania University, I was reminded of how this mirrored the Birsa Munda Youth of Kamaram's celebration that was discussed in the previous chapter. The appropriation of August 9th is resonant with Handelman's (1990, 223) argument on how societies use calendar days to create cultural meanings and shape social practices. Here, the *Adivasi* students have made August 9th their own, to express their alignment with the global discourse of indigeneity and asserting their claims as the Indigenous people of India. As I headed on a long bus ride back to my hostel and pondered over the event, I was intrigued by the intentionality in celebrating the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples and intertwining it with *Adivasi*. Thus, I take this event as a starting point in this chapter to examine how *Adivasi* is understood and articulated by the Koyas of Telangana.

3.2 Introduction

Adivasi is a Hindi word that consists of ‘*Adi*’, which means ‘from the beginning or since the earliest time’, and ‘*vasi*’, which means ‘inhabitants’ (Hardiman 1987, 13). According to the historian David Hardiman (1987), the term *Adivasi* was popularised in the Chhota Nagpur region by members of the Adivasi Mahasabha in 1938. They wanted to show that ‘the *Adivasis* were the original inhabitants of the respective lands, and that they had a prior right of control over and above later interlopers—namely, the “landgrabbers”, moneylenders, and officials of different communities’ (Hardiman 2015, 4). The President of the Adivasi Mahasabha, Jaipal Singh Munda, was a member of the Constituent Assembly, a government body established in 1946 to frame the Constitution of India. In his speeches to the Assembly, he ‘spoke of *Adivasi* traditions, languages, and practices with pride while repeatedly reminding the Assembly of their dispossession and impoverishment’ (Parmar 2012, 516). He emphasised that the tribal communities were ‘original inhabitants of India’ and insisted on using *Adivasi* in his speeches. In his words: ‘I am an *Adibasi*, I call myself an *Adibasi*. I cannot understand why you wish to give us another name’.¹⁹ Hence, from the onset, *Adivasi* was not merely a Hindi translation for tribal communities. As I will show in this chapter, it is an assertion that is imbued with the articulation of rights and a collective representation of tribal identity.

The need to articulate rights and to collectively represent tribal identity as *Adivasi* emerged largely owing to the precarity faced by many *Adivasi* communities in India (Donegan et al. 2017; Dungdung, Padel and Damodaran 2022; Ghosh 2016, 2021; Munshi 2012; Noy 2022; Ranjan 2017). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the inequalities faced by tribal youths as regards education and access to proper health care (Kasi and Saha 2021; Nayak and Alam 2022; J. P. Sharma 2022). This precarity is underpinned by the tenuous relationship between *Adivasi* communities and state institutions (Nilsen 2018; Shah 2010; Sundar 2019) which some have argued can be traced back to the rendering of *Adivasi* as the ‘primitive other’ by colonial and historical accounts (Banerjee 2006, 2016; Bhukya 2017; Das Gupta 2020). The systemic marginalisation suffered by *Adivasis* in the hands of the state has led to the rise of *Adivasi* resistance in India, which has been largely characterised as violent insurgency since India’s independence and the emergence of the Naxalite movement.²⁰ However, Bates and Shah

¹⁹ *Adibasi* is synonymous with *Adivasi*. The spelling differs because of the difference in pronunciation.

²⁰ For an in-depth analysis of the Naxalite movement and its impact on *Adivasi* communities, see Shah’s *In the Shadows of the State: Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism, and Insurgency in Jharkhand, India* (2010) and Sundar’s (2019) *The Burning Forest: India’s War against the Maoists*.

(2017) highlight in *Savage Attack: Tribal Insurgency in India* an important limitation of this characterisation. They write that viewing Adivasis as insurgents reifies:

the notion that these are a people with whom there is little scope for negotiation, who are incapable of understanding the art of politics apart from through the use of force, and who in turn thus need to be either protected or managed by force (Bates and Shah 2017, 1).

Bates and Shah call for a ‘historically, socially and politically situated approach to the ways in which forms of resistance get labelled as “Adivasi” or “tribal” or not’ (2017, 2). I take this approach to think about the multiple ways (cultural, social and economic) that *Adivasi* communities respond to the precarity they face. For example, Hembrom’s (2022) article on *Adivasi* writings and narratives reminds us that writing and orality by *Adivasis* are practices of agency, resistance and resurgence. Similarly, the event with which I began this chapter is a public display of unity and identity assertion.

At the same time, the framing of unity can also be viewed as part of an assertion technique. Still, as anthropologists often point out, we should also recognise the plurality of experiences and modes of negotiation, all of which reflect the complexities of being an *Adivasi* in India and the ways that it can differ across contexts.²¹ Furthermore, *Adivasi* is politically meaningful since it expresses ‘not just dispossession and marginalisation, but also hope and resilience’ (Damodaran and Dasgupta 2022, 1374). Thus, *Adivasi* does cohere to a claim of indigeneity, but this coherence is by no means static. My ethnographic account offers a contribution to this literature on *Adivasis* by detailing the multiplicity of meanings that emerge as tribal communities engage with the *Adivasi* concept and with state and non-state actors.

The emphasis in this chapter is on the Koyas deploying *Adivasi* as an articulation of indigeneity. The narrative sequence that I chart here can be captured as follows: The Indian state does not recognise indigeneity for tribal communities. As *Adivasis*, we demand to be recognised as the Indigenous peoples of India and protection of our constitutional rights. Furthermore, what might the narratives regarding *Adivasi* tell us about the hope, fears and wants of the Koyas of Telangana? Here, I draw on Kate Williams’ discussion on strategic positioning, which I find particularly useful. Williams writes, ‘actors engage in strategic positioning and repositioning to situate their intellectual labour and gain capital in a hybrid space that lacks clearly defined symbolic resources’ (2020, 1071). She observes how positioning theory is a ‘means of

²¹ Of note, the term ‘*Adivasi*’ is rejected by the tribal communities in North-East India, and as I will explore in Chapter 6, rejected by *Hinduva* groups who prefer to use ‘*Vanavasi*’ instead.

conceptualising the strategic ways different types of capital are sought and attained by research actors' (Williams 2020, 1071). Taken together, these call for an examination of the strategies that actors deploy to gain capital, which in the context of activism, are manifested in the forms of legitimacy and credibility. An example is found in what Steur (2017) terms as 'Indigenist Mobilisation'. In her work on *Adivasi* politics in Kerala, she discusses how indigeneity serves as a form of strategic identity as a means for tribals in Kerala to secure their rights. In a similar vein, I argue that the Koyas of Telangana articulate *Adivasi* as an assertion of indigeneity and gain strategic positioning to secure their rights. In addition, I suggest that *Adivasi*, when deployed in tribal activism, articulates a reimagined future for not just the Koyas of Telangana, but for all tribal communities in India.

3.2.1 *Adivasi* and Scheduled Tribe

Before describing how the Koyas deploy *Adivasi* as a narrative of indigeneity and activism, I provide an important clarification here. Since the Koyas often mention *Adivasi* and Scheduled Tribe together and use them interchangeably in their everyday parlance, an examination of the close relationship between both ethnonyms will help to anchor the following argument: *Adivasi* is an assertion of indigeneity and a form of strategic positioning. However, this does not mean that *Adivasi* and Scheduled Tribe are identical. As mentioned earlier, *Adivasi* connotes the idea of 'original inhabitants' but holds no legal recognition. The term Scheduled Tribe is the only legal and constitutional term for tribal communities in India. Its legality stems from the debates held in the Constituent Assembly of India in December 1948 (McMillan 2005, 127). The Constituent Assembly was responsible for finalising a constitutional and legal framework for India's affirmative action policies for tribal communities, such as the reservation of seats in public service and education. Dr B. R Ambedkar, the architect of India's Constitution, raised the point that the term 'Scheduled Tribe' allowed for a proper enumeration of tribal communities whereas *Adivasi* was only 'a general term' and had no 'specific legal de jure connotation' (Parmar 2012, 515). It was also stated that if any *Adivasi* community wanted to be recognised as ST, provisions could be made. With this concession in place, the term Scheduled Tribe was thus included in the Constitution of India.

Today, this term has become synonymous with the issues of rights and affirmative action of tribal communities in India. *Adivasi*, as pointed out by Xaxa (2008, 5), captures the 'historical experiences and social consciousness' of tribal communities, and in so doing, has 'become a powerful point of reference for social and political mobilization in India'. While here I

predominantly examine the term *Adivasi*, my next chapter offers a detailed account of how the term Scheduled Tribe serves as another key identity marker for the Koyas of Telangana.

For this chapter, I provide two case studies to show how the Koyas deploy *Adivasi* as an assertion of indigeneity and a form of strategic positioning. The first case study is an analysis on Tudum Debba, a tribal organisation that purports to fight for the rights of *Adivasis* in Telangana. I illustrate how the narrative of *Adivasi* as Indigenous is expressed in the symbols and ethos of Tudum Debba, a Telangana-based tribal organisation of Koyas. Then I examine how this narrative animates their activism and underpins their notion of a better future for tribal communities in India. I conclude this case study by discussing how Tudum Debba acts an intermediary between the Indian State and the Koyas and, in doing so, intertwines the narrative of the Koyas being both Indigenous and STs in India.

The second case study is of Arjun, a Tudum Debba leader and my key interlocutor in the field, and how he weaves a narrative of *Adivasi* to accentuate his activism. Here, I show that activism for Arjun is a struggle for rights and creating a sense of an emancipatory future for the Koyas of Telangana. My primary focus is on Arjun's first foray into electoral politics in 2018. Through an analysis of his electoral campaign, I discuss how electoral politics represents an evolution of Arjun's activism and how *Adivasi* is being deployed as a strategic narrative by Arjun: that is, with a particular end in mind.

3.3 *Adivasi* As Indigeneity: Tudum Debba

My first encounter with Koya activists from Tudum Debba was in 2013 when I was doing my fieldwork for my master's degree in anthropology. I was introduced to Arjun, who lived in Kamaram and was a Tudum Debba leader. We soon became good friends, and he became my key interlocutor in Kamaram. Through his connections in Tudum Debba, I met Koya activists and attended Tudum Debba events. Since then, I've continued my interactions with Tudum Debba activists for the thesis fieldwork in 2018. Through both stints of fieldwork, I gained insights into Koya activism as expressed through Tudum Debba. Of note, Tudum Debba, though purported to be the largest in terms of membership and presence, is not the only tribal organisation present in Telangana. There are other organisations, such as *Adivasi Sankshema*

Parishad, Adivasi Kondareddi Sangham, Nayakpod Seva Sangham and Adivasi Rakshana Sangham.²²

3.3.1 Overview of Tudum Debba: Structure, Symbols and Slogan

Tudum Debba was founded in 1996 by a Koya, Dabbakatla Narsingharao, and its official name is ‘Adivasi Hakkula Porata Samiti’, or the ‘Society Fighting for the Rights of Adivasis’, which is an amalgam of Hindi (*Adivasi*) and Telugu (*Hakkula Porata Samiti*) words.²³ It is not a pan-India organisation, and most of its members are Koyas residing in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Its three main wings are the Adivasi Students Union (ASU), the Adivasi Employees Welfare and Cultural Association and the Women’s Wing. Each of the wings has its respective state and district committees that oversee the activities of Tudum Debba.²⁴ The ASU members in Telangana were recruited during their time as students in degree colleges or universities such as Kakatiya University and Osmania University. As I will elaborate later, their main reason for being in ASU is that the ASU functions as an intermediary between them and the university administration. As for leadership positions, members elect their leaders for a two-year term and extended for leaders who are considered to have displayed exemplary contribution to the organisation.

Tudum Debba’s broad aims and objectives tend to centre around asserting the rights accorded to them by the state and the need to protect *Adivasi* culture and identity. In my interviews with the activists, the common aims and objectives they mentioned were the reinforcement of the *I/70 Act* (also known as the *Land Transfer Act*) and *Forest Rights Act*, and the establishment of autonomous tribal councils for governance in the tribal areas.²⁵ In a conversation with a Tudum Debba activist, he stressed that tribal identity is crucial for the Koyas and that he wants to ‘remind the people about their tribal roots, customs and heritage’. This desire was evident during the two meetings in the village that I attended with him. About 20 to 25 Koya villagers attended both meetings, and men formed a slight majority of the attendees. One meeting was held in an Anganwadi school, and the other in the courtyard of a villager’s home. In both

²² One of the Koyas in Kamaram is an active member of Adivasi Sankshema Parishad. He was a former Tudum Debba member but left because he was dissatisfied with Tudum Debba’s style of activism. The politics between these organisations is beyond the scope of my fieldwork, but it does indicate how the Koyas are not homogeneous in their support for tribal organisations.

²³ Information from this section originates from my master’s fieldwork and has been updated during the fieldwork for this thesis.

²⁴ Due to the exigencies of the fieldwork, I could not interact with Tudum Debba members other than those from the ASU and the Adivasi Employees Welfare and Cultural Association

²⁵ The Land Transfer Act bans all land transactions between tribals and non-tribals and the Forest Rights Act recognizes the rights of the forest dwelling tribal communities and other traditional forest dwellers to forest resources.

meetings, he shared ideas about their clans, their respective totems and their marriage rules and some historical background of the Koyas. When I asked him the reason behind sharing this information with the Koyas, he said: ‘It is my responsibility to help preserve our culture and identity and to stop it from being lost. The people nowadays have forgotten their roots, especially the younger ones’. These meetings are therefore grounds for disseminating ideas and organising and mobilising the youth around Koya cultural identity.

The symbols and language of Tudum Debba are equally critical for the dissemination of identity markers. A translation of Tudum Debba means ‘beating of a drum’, and the symbol of Tudum Debba is two sticks hitting a type of drum commonly used by the Koyas and other tribal communities for their festivals (see Figure 3.4). As the beating of the drum signifies the start of the festival and is a signal for people to gather, Arjun likens this symbol to ‘a call for all Adivasis to unite and fight for their rights’. The symbol of Tudum Debba’s student wing, ASU, is a tribal couple: a man carrying a bow and a lady holding a sickle used for harvesting rice (see Figure 3.5). The bow symbolises the call to arms for the men to fight for their rights, and the sickle emphasises the importance of the women in ensuring sustenance for the tribals. The couple in the symbol are dressed in traditional clothing and hold their hands high together, which, according to Arjun, connotes the equal and symbiotic relationship between men and women in tribal communities. This is, of course, a romanticised portrayal of *Adivasis*, with echoes of ‘salvage anthropology’ aimed at the preservation of culture. Yet unlike colonial and early anthropological account, here it is carried out by the ‘subjects’ themselves and serves to underscore the pride that tribal communities have in their history and heritage and deployed for both strategic ends and meaning making in the community.



Figure 3.4: Tudum Debba Symbol

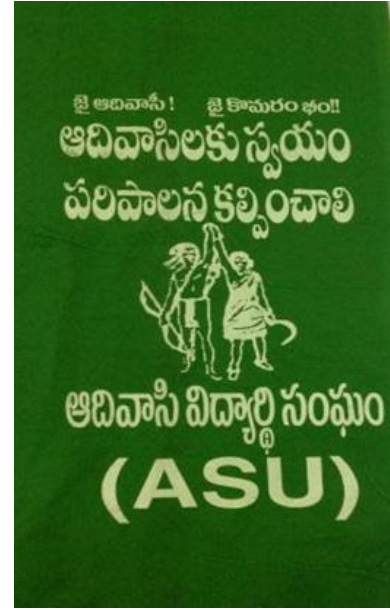


Figure 3.5: ASU Symbol on a Scarf

The first set of Telugu words above the ASU symbol are ‘Jai Adivasi!’ and ‘Jai Komaram Bheem!’ Komaram Bheem was a Gond tribal hero who led a rebellion in the 1930s against the feudal rulers of the area. He coined the slogan ‘*Jal, Jangal, Zameen*’ (‘Water, Forest, Land’). Many *Adivasi* organisations, including Tudum Debba, have adopted this slogan. The Telugu words in bold above the symbol translate to ‘Self-governance for Adivasis’ and the words below it to ‘Adivasi Students Union’. The colour green features prominently in both symbols and in the next few figures in this chapter, one can see green flags and scarves in Tudum Debba’s events. When asked about this colour, Ravi, a Tudum Debba member and a Koya, replied that it represents the Indigenous lands that belonged to the *Adivasis* and a reminder to reclaim their ownership of these lands.

The brief overview of Tudum Debba’s structure, symbols and slogans illustrates how Tudum Debba constructs a narrative of Adivasi identity as one that is intertwined with indigeneity, According to Xaxa (2008, 39):

Adivasi consciousness and the demand for indigenous people status are not so much about the claim to being the original inhabitants of India ... [they] are basically expressions of a yearning for a special relation with the territory in which they live.

This special relation with territory or land is expressed through not only Tudum Debba’s slogan but also its demands for autonomy. Benbabaali (2022), using a case study of the Bhadrachalam

Scheduled Area of Telangana, argues that the demand for autonomy of the tribal communities in this area is a response to their dispossession and displacement under successive modern governments, which have stripped them of their resource-rich territories. She writes ‘control over territory and natural resources formed an important material basis of Adivasi autonomy, which also helped them to preserve their culture’ (Benbabaali 2022, 1673).²⁶ Hence, alongside the term *Adivasi*, we can see images and a language that suggest a particular vision of the past and future for these tribal communities, whose claims for autonomy over their identity and lands are paramount.

Although tribal communities are said to have certain rights under the Indian Constitution, the failure of the Indian State to guarantee these rights and the continuous dispossession of tribals has precipitated an assertive response from these communities. Tribal organisations, such as Tudum Debba, play a key role in framing this assertive response as *Adivasi*, thus intertwining indigeneity and activism to strive for a better future for tribal communities in India. In the next section, I examine practices (beyond symbolism) and discuss how Tudum Debba’s activism perpetuates this narrative of *Adivasi* among the Koyas and other tribal communities in Telangana, India.

3.3.2 Activism of Tudum Debba: Education

A key aspect of Tudum Debba’s activism is education. By education, I refer to Tudum Debba’s efforts to inform tribal communities on Indigenous identity and their rights through organising *padayatras* (long marches), night meetings in villages, public rallies and seasonal events and festivals. Here, I share a short vignette of a night meeting chaired by Vinay, a Tudum Debba activist in the winter of December 2013. The meeting was held in a Koya village and about 25 persons attended the meeting. The meeting started with the topic of Koya religion, and he detailed the origins of *Sammakka* and *Sarakka*, a story about how a mother and daughter were blessed with mystical powers to protect the Koyas. He emphasised that the worship of *Sammakka* and *Sarakka* during the Medaram *Jatatra* is ‘purely Koya’ and had nothing to do with Hinduism. This emphasis on Koya identity as distinct from a Hindu one is especially pertinent, given that Hindu organisations have sought to assimilate tribals into their fold—to varying degrees of success—as I examine in Chapter 6 of this thesis. The next part of his talk was about land issues and how the Koyas should not be ‘cheated’ of their land by non-tribals.

²⁶While Benbabaali does raise an important point about giving autonomy to tribal communities, she presents an uncritical and somewhat romanticised reading of *Adivasi* culture as a strictly definable entity. - see my footnote 7 on page 32.

He went on to share how Tudum Debba has helped some of them to regain their land rights through their *dharnas* (peaceful sit-in protests).²⁷ Once again, the discussion revolved around relevant issues of concern to the community, which most attendants were quite aware about.

In the final part of the meeting, Vinay outlined a program of action, stating how Tudum Debba organises rallies to address these pressing concerns and how supporting such rallies is important to help secure their rights. Finally, he asked the people present at the meeting whether they had any doubts and to bring up any issues they face when dealing with the state or non-tribals. After one such meeting, a Koya couple approached Vinay and asked him to clarify the marriage rules, for they were concerned that they might have contravened the rules.²⁸ Vinay asked them their names and clarified that they had not contravened the rules. Then, he reminded them to pass on this knowledge to their peers. Here, Vinay is not merely an activist who helps to advocate for land rights, but also a type of ‘priest’ who provides knowledge on marriage rules.

Tudum Debba activists also engage their community through other activities, for example, by organising long-distance foot marches, or *padayatras*. By walking from village to village, the *padayatra* allows Tudum Debba activists to interact with the Koyas, educate them about the importance of Indigenous identity and rights, and galvanise support for Tudum Debba (see Figure 3.6). Among ASU members, *padayatras* are especially popular since most of the activists are young and are willing to go through the physical hardship of a *padayatra*. The idea of physical hardship has long been a culturally valued practice in India, as a form of personal sacrifice that one is willing to perform for the greater good of the community (Soboslai 2018). When I spoke to some of the ASU members about their involvement in *padayatras*, two comments I received were ‘It was tough, but it was for a good cause’ and ‘We walked over 200 kilometres in six days, but we were not tired’. It was evident that they took much pride in taking part in a *padayatra* because it portrayed them undergoing hardship for a cause.

²⁷ The *dharna* is a non-violent sit-in protest that involved individuals or groups and it emerged as a popular form of protest during the Indian independence movement (see Mitchell 2014).

²⁸ The Koya kinship system has seven clans, and the marriage rules state that a Koya cannot marry someone from the same clan. By asking for their names, Vinay was able to ascertain the clans to which the couple belonged.



Figure 3.6: ASU Padayatra

In addition, Gandhi was perhaps the most famous proponent of the *padayatra* as a form of mobilisation for various social and political issues as part of India’s freedom struggle. These days, the *padayatra* has been deployed as a popular tool of mobilisation for various causes, ranging from ending sex-selective abortion in Haryana and opposing ‘predatory corporations’ in Odisha to highlighting the ‘land and livelihood’ issues of Dalits and tribals such as the Tharus and Boxas in Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh (Kumar 2017, 33). Most recently, Rahul Gandhi, a Congress politician, conducted a *padayatra*, titled Bharat Jodo Yatra (Uniting India March), ‘to address rampant unemployment & inflation, the politics of hate and division and the over-centralisation of our political system’ (Bharat Jodo Yatra 2022). Radhika Kumar highlights three aspects of the *padayatra* that make it a medium of mobilisation, as follows: it is a tool to voice local concerns on a national scale, a way to create awareness and a form of collective nonviolent protest (Kumar 2017, 34–35). Hence, Tudum Debba’s deployment of *padayatras* is as a technique to engage people in a culturally meaningful way and also, to promote knowledge dispersions and mobilisation.

Another key aspect of Tudum Debba activism that emphasises the value of indigeneity is the organisation of public rallies in various towns and villages. These rallies are centred on the theme of indigeneity by reminding the Koyas of how they are the original inhabitants and protectors of the forest lands, that external influences, such as Hinduism, have diluted their culture and that they should be the ones controlling the resources of the lands and reaping the benefits. Such self-empowerment—Tudum Debba proclaims—is the path out of poverty for the community. Some rallies cover information on specific legislation, such as the *Forest Rights Act*, or reiterate their demands for an Indigenous and autonomous State Council. Similar to the

padayatras, these rallies by Tudum Debba do not merely serve to inform about rights but are also an attempt to awaken the Indigenous pride of the tribal communities.

In October 2018, Arjun and the Tudum Debba leaders from Warangal organised a rally to inaugurate the Komaram Bheem statue in Tadvai. When Arjun and I arrived at Tadvai, ASU members were already busy setting up the stage, tents and audio equipment. At around noon, the crowd soon swelled to about a hundred persons. Some of the Tudum Debba activists held the green flags of Tudum Debba, and a couple of them beat steel drums. The sense of excitement in the air was palpable. About an hour later, Arjun announced that they would walk to the Samakka Sarakka shrine in Tadvai to first seek the blessings of the goddesses. An ASU member handed me a green scarf to put around my neck as I walked to the shrine with the crowd (see Figure 3.7). After paying homage at the shrine, we returned to Tadvai and sat under the tents (see Figure 3.8).



Figure 3.7: Walking to the Shrine



Figure 3.8: People at the Rally

At Tadvai, there were 10 Tudum Debba leaders on the stage, including Arjun, and each of them gave a short speech (see Figure 3.9). Arjun, being a prominent Tudum Debba leader, spoke last, and he received the loudest reception. Everyone cheered at various points of his speech as he talked about protecting their land rights, preserving *Adivasi* culture and emulating the example of Komaram Bheem by fighting for autonomy over their lands. He concluded the speech by saying that a better future awaited *Adivasis* if they continued fighting for their rights as *Adivasis*. After his speech, the Tudum Debba leaders proceeded to inaugurate the statue of Komaram Bheem by garlanding it (see Figure 3.10) and shouting ‘*Jai Adivasi! Jai Komaram Bheem!*’



Figure 3.9: Tudum Debba Leader Giving a Speech



Figure 3.10: Tudum Debba Leaders Garlanding the Statue of Komaram Bheem in Tadvai

In examining Tudum Debba's activism, *Adivasi* emerges as a key narrative for the Koyas and other tribal communities in Telangana. It is a narrative of indigeneity that is intertwined with rights and autonomy, and it is anchored in meaningful materiality and symbolism (see Miller 2005). It allows the tribal communities to coalesce their demands for their constitutional rights and articulates a better future for them. It is through culturally meaningful and familiar practices, such as rallies, coupled with the village meetings and padayatras, statues, temples, days of worship in the calendar and so on that Tudum Debba seeks to spread its message and inform the Koyas and other tribal communities on what it means to be *Adivasi*. Kamat describes

a similar process whereby *Adivasi* activism is aimed at ‘a pedagogy directed at demystifying the state’ and empowering their community by developing knowledge about the state and their rights as citizens (2002, 122). By demystifying, I refer to how activists from Tudum Debba educate the tribal communities on the various government schemes, land rights and reservations available for them. Hence, my own ethnographic study suggests that Tudum Debba is engaged in multiple strategies that aim to inform, educate, and mobilise the Koyas in their struggle for rights in order to create an emancipatory future.

3.3.3 Tudum Debba As Intermediary

To illustrate how Tudum Debba acts an intermediary between state institutions and the tribal communities, let me recall a vignette from the fieldwork which I carried out during my master’s degree in anthropology in 2013. I was invited to attend a Tudum Debba *dharna* at Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) Eturnagaram.²⁹ While waiting for the *dharna* to commence in the late afternoon, I spoke to Mr Ravi, one of the Tudum Debba leaders, about the reason for the *dharna*. He shared that ‘Koyas are facing problems with the non-tribals over land disputes. Today, we will present a petition for one of the Koyas to ITDA and doing this *dharna* to get attention from ITDA’. He also added that they would help the *Adivasis* write to the various government agencies and that once all administrative avenues are exhausted, they will search for a lawyer to fight their case in court. When the *dharna* started, I was slightly surprised for there were no more than 25 persons there. A couple of Tudum Debba leaders were present, and the whole group sat outside the ITDA building shouting slogans. Some of them waved green flags (see Figure 3.11). About 30 minutes later, a senior ITDA official came out of the building and spoke to the Tudum Debba leaders. One of the leaders handed over a petition written on paper with a Tudum Debba letterhead and exchanged a few words with a senior ITDA official. The group then dispersed and went their separate ways. After the event, I spoke to the Koya who was represented by Tudum Debba. He shared that the leaders in Tudum Debba helped him craft the petition, and he was confident that the issue would be resolved.

²⁹ The ITDA oversees various programs pertaining to the socio-economic development of tribal communities in India.



Figure 3.11: Tudum Debba *Dharna* outside ITDA Eturnagaram

It was an interesting experience to observe the *dharna* and the interaction between the ITDA official and Tudum Debba. It was a cordial affair, and to me, it felt like a well-orchestrated performance. The Tudum Debba members did not rush into the building and disrupt the work of the ITDA staff, and neither did the ITDA staff call for the police to stop the *dharna*. Rather, it seemed like both sides knew the implicit rules of the engagement. In the next chapter, I will delve further into how these interactions between state institutions and the Koyas are encapsulated in the term ‘Scheduled Tribe’. For now, this short vignette serves as an example of Tudum Debba acting as an intermediary between the Koyas and state institutions, by deploying culturally and politically meaningful techniques to render their plight to the authorities. Apart from sending petitions to government institutions, ASU, the student wing of Tudum Debba, acts as an intermediary by helping tribal students navigate their studies at universities. For example, they help them find campus accommodation, fill applications for financial help and create a support network within the university. Thus, Tudum Debba plays a key role in creating a supportive infrastructure for the community, and raising the people’s concerns to those in power, further cementing their importance and value for tribal communities in Telangana.

Nilsen’s research on *Adivasi* organisations in Madhya Pradesh is similarly revealing. He argued that such organisations were especially effective in ‘transforming local rationalities ... where the villagers had once seen a state apparatus whose activities centred on the forceful exaction of tribute, they came to see an (state) institution that was supposed to provide services and safeguard rights’ (Nilsen 2013, 623). This shift in perspective—mediated by organisations such

as Tudum Debba—encourages a similar shift, creating a ‘local rationality’ whereby tribal communities can better engage with state authorities, equipped with the skills, resources and technical know-how to promote Indigenous rights, and assert their identity.

3.4 *Adivasi* as Activism: A Case Study of Arjun

The story of Arjun, a Tudum Debba leader, and his activism is a powerful example to highlight how *Adivasi* can be expressed in terms of promoting an emancipatory future for tribal communities. Here, I present a brief overview of Arjun’s background and biography. Arjun is the younger brother of Santhosh, the host of my fieldwork in Kamaram. He is in his mid 20s and pursuing his PhD in Public Administration with Kakatiya University. Arjun’s parents passed away when Arjun was in his early teens, which meant that Santhosh was his main caretaker. Although Arjun is not a Kornibelli, he commands much respect in the village due to his activism and educational qualifications. Beyond his academic pursuits and activism, Arjun is an avid writer and enjoys playing volleyball.

From my conversations with Arjun, I could sense his deep passion for being an activist. He spoke eloquently about the problems faced by *Adivasis* in the region due to poor governance and how various laws and policies for their welfare were not implemented fully by the Indian state. This reflects what Sharma and Gupta suggest in the study of the state: ‘Besides examining the production and circulation of discourses about the state, ethnographies of the state also involve analyzing how messages about the state are interpreted and mobilized by people according to their particular contexts and social locations’ (2006, 19). To the *Adivasis*, the Indian state is not some detached monolithic entity. Rather, it is embedded in their everyday lives ‘through everyday practices and encounters and through public cultural representations and performances’ (Sharma and Gupta 2006, 27). The embeddedness is seen in how the *Adivasis* look to state institutions as both the source and solution to their troubles.

Further, Sharma and Gupta suggest that ‘everyday statist encounters not only shape people’s imagination of what the state is and how it is demarcated, but also enable people to devise strategies of resistance to this imagined state’ (2006, 17). This is where Arjun’s activism serves as a strategy of resistance to this imagined state. By participating in activism, he tries to reshape the everyday state encounters in which *Adivasis* are exploited and subjugated. Through his activism, he attempts to promote a vision of an emancipatory future that community members

can and should create through a range of activities and events to help assert their identity as *Adivasis*.

When I asked about his reasons for being a Tudum Debba activist, he referred to the 1981 Indravelli massacre, in which 13 tribals were indiscriminately killed by the police. A rally was organised on 20 April 1981 in Indravelli, a town in Telangana. The aim of the rally was to demand land certificates for tribals and to protest encroachments by non-tribals. As the police had issued orders to ban the rally only on the day before it was to be held, many tribals who intended to attend the rally were unaware about the ban and had already arrived in Indravelli. This led to a tense situation, and the police resorted to violence to disperse the crowd. The situation escalated into the police firing into the crowd, killing 13 tribals and injuring hundreds (Raghuram 1981). This incident led to outrage among the tribals and has motivated many youths like Arjun to participate in activism. While the event took place many decades ago, it continues to resonate strongly with community members who saw the Indravelli massacre as a reflection of their marginalisation by the Indian state.

Arjun joined ASU in his teens and has quickly risen through the ranks of the organisation, largely because he is a skilled orator and writer. He is a constant presence at Tudum Debba meetings and would also give speeches in universities to highlight the plight of tribal communities (see Figure 3.12). He shared with me that, in one of the Tudum Debba rallies, he criticised the administration with such vitriol that he was arrested soon after the rally, which further cemented his place as a prominent Tudum Debba activist. As for his writing, Arjun has published many articles in regional newspapers, such as *Namaste Telangana* and *Andhra Jyoti*, and in magazines, *Dhimsa* and *Adivasi Gothuka*. In 2016, he published a book, titled *Adivasi Jivana Vidhvansam (The Destruction of Adivasi Life)*, on various problems that tribal communities in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh face, such as displacement, a lack of development and the failure of the state to implement policies pertaining to tribal welfare and development.



Figure 3.12: Arjun Giving a Speech

The anthropologist George Kunnath (2006) uses the term ‘organic intellectual’ to characterise the life story of a Naxalite from the Dalit community.³⁰ Drawing from Gramsci (1971, 5-23), Kunnath defines an ‘organic intellectual’ as someone that,

seeks to establish an internal hegemony: that is, not merely to express but to give coherence to the ideas/programmes/project of their own class or its allies... whose political efficacy not only operates at the rural grassroots but also is continuously reproduced at this level (2006, 105).

Similarly, Arjun presents himself as an organic intellectual as his activism is centred around educating tribal communities about their rights, creating awareness of the problems and issues they face, and promoting unity among them through public gatherings, rallies and religious festivals. For Arjun, this is underpinned by first recognising that they are *Adivasis*, that they are the Indigenous people of India and, with that, bears the constitutional rights that are given to them. For him, the path for a better future for tribal communities is by asserting that they are *Adivasis*.

3.4.1 Adivasi as Strategic Positioning in Electoral Politics

It was a cool Wednesday morning in February 2019, and my slumber ended at 4 am with Arjun gently tapping me on my shoulder and saying, ‘Brother. Wake up. We are going to Hyderabad for important meeting’. I got up reluctantly from my bed and saw that Arjun was already dressed in a shirt and ironed pants, very different from his usual T shirt and shorts ensemble. The way

³⁰ Dalits, also known as the untouchables, is the term for people belonging to the lowest stratum of India’s caste system.

he was dressed indicated that we were going to meet someone who wielded considerable influence. I quickly got dressed, and Arjun handed me a couple of books that he had written. I kept the books in my bag, and we walked to a car waiting outside. We drove to Tadvai and picked up Naresh, a close friend of Arjun. When we reached Hyderabad about three hours later, we had to contend with its notorious peak hour traffic, and it was another two hours before the car finally stopped in the courtyard of a building. When I stepped out of the car, I was greeted by a cacophony of voices, and there were people talking animatedly on their phones. I saw the lotus symbol of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the current ruling political party in India, and realised that we were at the BJP (Telangana) headquarters.

Naresh told us to wait for him in the courtyard as he had to go in to arrange the meeting. Arjun and I walked over to the small *chai* stand at the gates of the building, where the *chaiwalla* was doing a brisk business selling piping hot *chai* and *samosas*.³¹ As we sipped hot *chai* while waiting for Naresh, I realised why we had to travel all the way here. About a week ago, Arjun had told me his intentions to contest the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. This meant Arjun had to meet with the upper echelons of the BJP leadership and convince them that he was the right candidate for the BJP. I felt slightly uneasy as I knew about the BJP's close ties with the RSS, an organisation known for their ethno-nationalist ideology. I wondered why Arjun would want to seek BJP's support in the Lok Sabha elections for he had never indicated to me that he is a firm supporter of the BJP.

After we had waited for another hour or so, Naresh appeared and beckoned us to follow him. We quickly walked up three flights of stairs and came to the office of one of the BJP (Telangana) leaders. Naresh told us to wait as the BJP leader was in a meeting. About half an hour later, the door of the office opened. I was expecting that we would be sitting down and having a lengthy discussion about Arjun's campaign for the upcoming elections. However, the BJP leader met us at the door and did not invite us in. As we stood at the door, Arjun took the books from my bag and gave it to him. They then exchanged some words, and once Arjun had introduced me to the leader, we were quickly ushered out of his office. I was surprised, we just travelled over five hours for this brief meeting, after all we met the leader for only 15 minutes. It did not seem like a meaningful trip to me. As we walked down the stairs, I still hoped that there would be a meeting with another BJP leader, but to my disappointment, we walked back to the car and together with Naresh, proceeded to start the long drive back to the village. On

³¹ A tea seller.

our journey back, we decided to stop at a roadside *dhaba* for some *chai* and snacks. I asked Arjun, ‘Brother, you told me before that all these political parties and politicians are no good for Koyas. And the BJP have a *Hindutva* agenda. Why did we meet BJP leader?’ Arjun smiled and told me, ‘Brother, to help *Adivasis* and to fight for our identity and rights, we need their power. If I become an MP [Member of Parliament], I can do more things for *Adivasis*’.

As I reflect on Arjun’s reply, the phrase ‘We need their power’ is particularly provocative as it represents how electoral politics has become an important part of Arjun’s activism. There are two points to highlight here. First, this ‘need of their power’ does not mean that he is powerless; rather, I suggest that it is a tactic to increase his influence in a particular direction. Arjun may not necessarily agree with the ideology of the BJP but with its resources and political clout, he would stand a much higher chance of being elected. This pragmatic (some might argue opportunistic) alignment mirrors that of Soyam Bapurao, a Tudum Debba leader who ran for MP in Adilabad under the BJP banner and won. In following Soyam Bapurao’s example, Arjun has accepted that electoral politics is the next phase of his activism: from acquiring grassroots experience to a higher level of political engagement.

Such a strategy resonates with Michelutti (2007)’s concept of ‘vernacularization of democratic politics’, where ‘values and practices of democracy become embedded in particular cultural and social practices, and in the process become entrenched in the consciousness of ordinary people’. Arjun’s entrance into electoral politics shows his belief in democracy as a medium for social change. In this context, becoming a MP is seen as an important factor in trying to make meaningful interventions in favour of his constituency: the *Adivasis*. To be clear, this foray into electoral politics may well be an act designed to better serve his community in the sphere of party politics, but this does not preclude personal interest to gain more influence —the two goals are not mutually exclusive (see Wouters 2018; Nath 2019).

3.4.2 The MP Campaign

In this section, I want to look more closely at Arjun’s electoral campaign to show how *Adivasi* (and tribal interests) is deployed as a form of strategic positioning. I argue that in using *Adivasi*, Arjun presents himself as a candidate who is not encumbered by the ideologies of political parties, but one that seeks to represent the interests of the tribal communities. Before discussing Arjun’s electoral campaign, I provide a brief context for the Lok Sabha elections. The Lok Sabha is the lower house of India's bicameral Parliament. Members of the Lok Sabha are elected

by a first-past-the-post system to represent their respective constituencies, and they hold their seats for five years.³² Certain constituencies in Telangana, for example, Adilabad and Mahabubabad, are reserved for members who hold Scheduled Tribe status. I will elaborate more on this in my next chapter. For now, it simply means that Arjun qualifies since he holds Scheduled Tribe status.

A couple of weeks after we visited the BJP office in Hyderabad, Arjun told me that he had been selected to represent Telangana Jana Samithi, a local political party founded by Muddasani Kodandaram Reddy.³³ When I asked him why he did not get the BJP ticket, he explained that the BJP was not ready to support him yet owing to his age and inexperience. Nevertheless, he was able to speak to other parties and managed to get the support of Telangana Jana Samithi. With some funds given by this party and support from the Koyas in Kamaram, Arjun and his team printed flyers and flags and rented two vehicles for canvassing votes (see Figure 3.13). Between March and April 2019, the eight of us (Arjun, six members of the BMYK and myself) travelled to villages throughout Mahabubabad, a district of Telangana. The routine was as follows, we would go to a village and hand out flyers. Arjun would give a short speech about the issues facing the tribal communities in Mahabubabad and outline his plans to tackle the issues. Arjun would also stay and listen to the grievances of the villagers (see Figure 3.14). Although we were exhausted after each day of campaigning, there were many moments of joy as the villagers received us warmly (see Figure 3.15).



Figure 3.13: Arjun's Campaign Vehicle **Figure 3.14: Arjun Listening to Koyas' Grievances**

³² A full listing of MPs can be accessed at <https://loksabha.nic.in/>

³³ Popularly known as Prof Kodandaram. He is an Indian activist and the former Chairman of the Telangana Joint Action Committee, which was formed with the goal of achieving a separate Telangana State.



Figure 3.15: A Warm Reception at a Village

There were also moments that reminded us about the difficulty of conducting an election campaign with little resources. Our flyers and flags were dwarfed by those of the major political parties in Telangana.³⁴ When we visited a village, I noticed a truck parked outside it and people climbing into the truck. I asked one of the villagers about this and he said:

There is big election rally in the town of Mulugu.³⁵ They give trucks like these to bring people to the rally. If you go, you get some money, maybe 250 rupees, maybe more, a biryani lunch, and for the men, some liquor also. All the big parties are doing this.

The villager was clearly aware that campaigning by political parties was also about courting the voters and getting into their good graces. By ‘gifting’ perks such as cash, food and liquor, the politicians had intended to persuade voters to support the party. Nevertheless, the observation from the villager also highlighted how all parties are involved in this form of campaigning. It also meant that the villagers were not fools and could take advantage of these perks and ultimately cast their vote (as secret ballots) according to their wish.

Having heard from the villager about the perks, I jokingly asked Arjun for my biryani lunch and money. He dismissed my request with a wry smile and continued talking to the villagers. When the results of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections were released, I was surprised that Arjun was in third place and garnered more votes than the BJP candidate. Although in terms of vote share, Arjun managed to garner only about 5% of the votes, it was an impressive result, considering

³⁴ The major parties are the Telangana Rashtra Samithi, BJP and Congress.

³⁵ It is a major town in Mahabubabad district.

that it was his maiden campaign. As I reflect on Arjun's electoral campaign, I suggest that one key factor in him getting votes was the way he framed himself as a candidate who represents *Adivasi* interests. Below is a short excerpt from one of his speeches to illustrate my point:

Earlier, *Adivasis* were taken advantage of by the Forest Department officials. Now, even the Police Department has started attacking and creating problems for *Adivasis*. When we observe all these, we can clearly understand that there is no importance for *Adivasis* and their issues. These major political parties are still under the impression that *Adivasis* who live in the forests do not have any awareness about their rights, and so, it is easy to buy their votes by giving cash or liquor in exchange for their votes. That is why none of these parties like BJP, Telangana Rashtra Samithi or Congress has given party tickets to *Adivasi* candidates.³⁶ Therefore, it is time for us [*Adivasis*] to show these parties a lesson. All *Adivasis* of all *gudem* [hamlets] must pledge to not give away their vote in exchange for money, liquor or any other favour promised by these BJP, TRS or Congress party workers. All *Adivasis* must pledge to vote for *Adivasi* candidate Mypathi Arjun Kumar and send him to Parliament as he has worked for *Adivasi* rights for the past 15 years with almost 25 cases registered against him.³⁷

In the speech above and the speeches he gave while canvassing for votes, Arjun drew attention to the lack of respect for *Adivasis*, as it was assumed that their votes can be bought by cash and liquor. He appealed to their sense of pride as *Adivasis* and asked them to aid him in rejecting this widespread and disparaging image of *Adivasis*. He emphasised that social upliftment depended on tribal communities coming together as *Adivasis* and fighting for their rights. He insisted that as an *Adivasi* and a Tudum Debba activist, he understood their issues and would fight for them. Furthermore, Arjun emphasised that he was a member of the community, unlike the politicians whose presence were only visible during the elections. He added that there were 25 police cases registered against him and this was proof that he placed his own security and wellbeing on the line. The points that Arjun raised were similar to his speeches as an activist, but with an added element that being an elected politician, he could bring about effective change. This reflects how *Adivasi* is being deployed as an appeal to the tribal communities, namely, that voting in an *Adivasi* MP will most authentically render their plight audible.

Nielsen's (2012) excellent article on Kabir Suman, an activist who contested the Lok Sabha elections from West Bengal, serves as a useful point of comparison here. In discussing Suman's election campaign, Nielsen writes about how the activist is portrayed as being a 'lord and boss' and that 'Suman relied on the lordly image of the humble and impartial social activist/social worker, whose engagement in politics occurs with scant regard for personal profit' (Nielsen 2012, 441; see also Alm 2010, 17). Similarly, Arjun portrays his engagement in politics as a

³⁶ The Telangana Rashtra Samithi is the current political party governing Telangana. The name of the party was changed from Telangana Rashtra Samithi to Bharat Rashtra Samithi on 5 October 2022.

³⁷ Speech translated by Sravanthi Pantangi.

duty and as an extension of his activism. By ‘boss’, Nielsen refers to how Suman uses fiery rhetoric to stir up emotions and portray himself as a passionate leader. Arjun too does not hold back his criticisms and often delivers fiery epithets about the plight of the *Adivasis*. However, Nielsen points out that the boundaries between activism and politics, although porous, create a difficult situation for the activist turned politician owing to the competing interests between the party and his activism. Suman’s eventual abandonment of politics signals a possible fate for Arjun as party politics might hinder his plans to fulfil his promises to the *Adivasis*.

Nevertheless, Arjun’s MP campaign shows the evolution of his activism and how *Adivasi* serves as a meaningful part of his identity as much as it is strategic instrument for his political ambitions. Being an *Adivasi* himself, he positions himself as the best candidate to represent the interests of, and address the issues pertaining to, the *Adivasi* communities in Telangana. His experience as an activist gives him symbolic capital, and he draws on a carefully crafted narrative of *Adivasi* community and life, as one beset by discrimination and dispossession at the hand of state actors. This narrative, combined with his own credibility as an *Adivasi* activist and deep knowledge of their history and culture, and his rhetorical capabilities, have enabled him to enter into politics. Although it remains uncertain whether he will be successful, it shows how the term *Adivasi* can be powerfully deployed as a narrative of indigeneity in political contexts by the Koyas.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examine one of the most commonly used ethnonyms for tribal communities in India, *Adivasi*. I argue that the Koyas express *Adivasi* as a key element in the construction of a narrative identity. In addition, I suggest that *Adivasi*, when deployed in tribal activism, articulates a reimagined future for not just the Koyas of Telangana, but for all tribal communities in India. The historian Archana Prasad, who has researched extensively on ideologies of resistance and forms of protest amongst *Adivasi* workers in India, writes that ‘both “Indigenous” and “Adivasi” can be considered political formations, expressing themselves as social identities, with particular cultural forms that arise from the common experiences of primitive accumulation and continuing processes of uneven development’ (2022, 43). Rather than wading into debates over whether the Koyas are Indigenous or not, I focus on how in claiming to be *Adivasis*, the Koyas are constructing a narrative identity in terms of indigeneity and activism that enables them to gain strategic advantage to secure their rights. This strategy relies on deploying *Adivasi* as a vehicle for making claims about indigeneity and autonomy.

When complemented with the constitutional rights given to tribal communities, such strategies and claims help these communities amplify their response to the systemic deprivation and precarity they face.

I provide two case studies to show how the Koyas deploy *Adivasi* as an assertion of indigeneity and a form of strategic positioning. I begin with a case study of Tudum Debba, a Koya-led tribal rights organisation based in Telangana, India. The aims and objectives of Tudum Debba are centred around asserting the rights accorded to them by the state and the need to protect *Adivasi* culture and identity. Through an analysis of its symbols and slogans, I show how Tudum Debba constructs a narrative of *Adivasi* identity as one that is intertwined with indigeneity. This is followed by a discussion of Tudum Debba's activism, such as night meetings, rallies and marches, where the element of indigeneity is emphasized along with educating tribal communities about their constitutional rights. I conclude the section by illustrating how Tudum Debba acts as an intermediary between state institutions and the tribal communities by deploying culturally and politically meaningful techniques to render their plight to the authorities. This includes the submission of petitions, organizing peaceful protests, and helping *Adivasi* students navigate their studies at universities. Thus, Tudum Debba deploys an articulation of *Adivasi* that is imbued with indigeneity and through their activism, portray an assertion of rights for tribal communities.

My second case study is that of Arjun, a Tudum Debba leader, and his activism is a powerful example to highlight how *Adivasi* can be expressed in terms of promoting an emancipatory future for tribal communities. Through an analysis of his electoral campaign, I argue that in using *Adivasi*, Arjun presents himself as a candidate who is not encumbered by the ideologies of political parties, but one that seeks to represent the interests of the tribal communities. His experience as an activist gives him symbolic capital, and he draws on a carefully crafted narrative of *Adivasi* community and life, as one beset by discrimination and dispossession at the hand of state actors. This narrative, combined with his own credibility as an *Adivasi* activist and deep knowledge of their history and culture, and his rhetorical capabilities, have enabled him to enter into politics. Thus, it shows how the term *Adivasi* can be powerfully deployed as a narrative of indigeneity in political contexts by the Koyas.

Chapter 4: Scheduled Tribe: Governing Koya Identity

4.1 Opening Vignette

As the loud crowing of the rooster reverberated throughout the village at seven in the morning, I reluctantly woke up and went for my morning walk. The morning walk had become a daily ritual for me to clear my mind before settling into the hustle of fieldwork. When I walked past an open field, I saw Vinay and his brothers doing sprints, while their cousin Praveen stood at the side, shouting words of encouragement at them occasionally. Their exhausted faces indicated that they had been working out for at least an hour or so. When they completed their sprints, I walked over to them and jokingly told Vinay, ‘You are already very fit, so there’s no need for you to exercise. I think I need more exercise than you. Are you preparing for a volleyball tournament?’ Vinay smiled and said, ‘No, brother. We are preparing for the police job’. Upon seeing my puzzled look, Vinay explained that he and his two brothers needed to pass a preliminary written exam, a physical fitness test and a final written exam to be selected as Telangana Police trainees. He ended off by saying, ‘We are Scheduled Tribe (ST), so there is reservation for us. We must try for these jobs’.

The very next day, Arjun asked me to meet him at Swathi’s house in Kamaram. When I walked over, he asked if I could help Swathi apply for admissions to universities based in Hyderabad. Swathi wanted to me to help with applications to three universities (Osmania University, English Foreign Languages University and University of Hyderabad) for three different disciplines (English, Anthropology and Sociology). As I navigated the various admission websites and assisted her to fill the applications, I received notifications that stated 7.5% of its seats for each postgraduate course are reserved for candidates from ST communities and that the qualifying mark for postgraduate courses for these candidates is generally 5% lesser than that for other candidates. To put this in context, Figure 4.1 shows the University of Hyderabad’s intake for the academic year 2022–23. Under the ST column, a total of 182 seats, or 7.59%, are reserved for ST candidates out of the 953 seats offered.

University of Hyderabad
Break-up for the approved Intake 2022-23

ABSTRACT									
Courses	GE	SC	ST	OBC	EWS	PH	Total	PH	DP
5-Year Int.	129	51	26	91	32		329	19	17
Postgraduate	601	223	112	404	148		1488	72	70
M.Tech.	95	41	21	74	28	15	274		
Ph.D.	107	46	23	84	30	16	306		
Total	932	361	182	653	238	31	2397	91	87
	38.91	15.07	7.59	27.22	9.93			5.05	4.78

Figure 4.1: Breakdown of Intake for 2022–23

However, a closer look at the breakdown of the numbers highlights the competitiveness for seats and the importance of the ST status for the Koya youths. The 182 seats are spread out unevenly across the degrees and subjects offered. Figure 4.2 shows the breakdown of seats for some of the courses in the Masters program. For example, 50 seats are offered for a Masters of Mathematics but only four of those seats are reserved for ST candidates, and 56 seats are offered for a Masters of Physics but only three seats are reserved for them.

TABLE - II : Break-up for the approved Intake for 2022-23 : PG Courses

S.No.	Course	Subject	GE	SC	ST	OBC	EWS	Total	PH	DP
1	M.Sc.	Mathematics / Applied Maths	19	8	4	14	5	50	2	2
2	M.Sc.	Statistics - OR	10	4	2	7	2	25	1	1
3	M.C.A.	Computer Applications	16	6	3	11	4	40	2	0
4	M.Sc.	Physics	26	7	3	15	5	56	3	3
5	M.Sc.	Chemistry	26	7	3	15	5	56	3	3

Figure 4.2: Breakdown of Seats for Master’s Program

Thus, although reservations for ST candidates in terms of university admissions are guaranteed at 7.5%, this percentage refers only to the total number of seats, but not for every degree or subject offered. Consequently, ST candidates, like Swathi, have to apply for multiple courses in different universities to enhance their chances of obtaining a university degree. Furthermore, the limited number of seats for ST candidates means that ST candidates throughout Telangana must compete among themselves. Regardless, the ST status for Swathi does provide her a slight advantage, although not guaranteed, to attain a university education: a path considered effective to ensure social mobility. To this end, one can also see how Swathi is exercising her agency to strategically navigate a system that has, over generations, stacked the cards against them.

I present these two short vignettes to reflect the importance of the ST status for the Koyas in Kamaram. The ST status is inimically linked to what Xaxa (2001, 156–90) describes as a policy

of positive discrimination. This policy is most pronounced across lower caste communities and STs. Here I focus on the ST reservation policy. The policy is manifest in three main areas: reservation of seats in state legislatures, jobs in government services, and admissions to institutions of higher learning, especially in colleges and universities.³⁸ With this policy in place and its privileges enshrined in the Constitution of India, it is not surprising that the majority of the Koya youths aspire to work in government jobs, such as with the Telangana Police or Forest Department, or to pursue a university degree and work in educational institutions as teachers. As Jonathan Parry (2019) has illustrated, securing government jobs allows the individual to accrue not just monetary benefits but also gain stature within the community. Also, these jobs are often inherited through generations, which leads to financial stability and opportunities to create generational wealth. For members of the ST community, reservations can offer the promise of potential employment, which in turn enhances both economic and social capital. Not surprisingly, being classified under the category of STs has become an integral part of how they represent themselves vis a vis the state apparatus.

4.2 Introduction

The opening vignettes have shown how the ST status is inimically tied to access to reservations and social mobility. To clarify, this chapter does not evaluate the policy of reservations and its efficacy in facilitating the social mobility of tribal communities in India. Many scholars, such as Corbridge (2000), Louis (2003) and Cheerangote (2018), have conducted extensive research on this issue. They have shown that the lack of uniformity in the implementation of reservations has led to variations in the outcomes for tribal communities in India. In this chapter, I focus on how the ST status has become an integral part of Koya identity and what it means for the Koyas when they say that ‘We are ST’. I argue that the Koyas deploy the ST status as a strategic move, that demonstrates their understanding of a biased system and how they might deploy part of it to their benefit. The insisting on a strategic representation tied to ST status (part of an overall narrative discussed throughout the thesis) informs Koya identity via the intertwined processes of governmentality and recognition. The philosopher Michel Foucault describes governmentality as ‘the art by which some people were taught the government of others, and others were taught to let themselves be governed by certain people’ (Foucault, Senellart and Davidson 2007, 151; also see pages 108–10). Put differently, governmentality as developed by

³⁸ As for October 2022, the reservation for STs has been increased from 6% to 10% and will be applicable to educational institutions and government jobs.

Foucault refers to the way in which the state and other institutions exert control over the behaviour of individuals and groups in society. But it extends beyond the laws and regulations that are put in place by governments, to the ways in which those laws and regulations are enforced, and the ways in which they shape the way people think and behave. Further, Foucault argued that governmentality is not just about the exercise of power by the state, but also about the way in which individuals and groups internalize and reproduce the values and norms of the society in which they live. These techniques of power demonstrate how the Indian state wields the ST status to exert its authority over the Koyas.

However, this does not equate to the passive subjugation of the Koyas. As I elaborate later, the Koyas use this ST status to assert the recognition of their constitutional rights by the state. This is expressed in the narrative sequence I chart in the thesis when I argue that in securing the ethnonym ST, the Koyas can strive to gain education, access to government institutions, with the hope of potential job security. This kind of sequence, I propose, is tied to identity claims, captured by insisting on retaining the ST title as in 'We are called ST by the Indian state', which effectively affords them better prospects for the future. This ongoing construction of a narrative of Koya identity draw in both the Indian State and the Koyas: two entities that can wield the ST status to advance their own ends.

To unpack my argument on how Koya identity is governed by the ST status, I structure my chapter into four sections. In the first section, I provide an overview of the term 'Scheduled Tribe' and how it has become embedded as a key narrative of tribal identity in India. In the second section, I borrow Foucault's concept of governmentality as a heuristic to examine how the Indian State uses the ST status to shape the identity of the Koyas of Telangana. In the third section, I discuss the act of petitioning to Ambedkar statues by the Koyas in Telangana. I show how this petitioning is a demand for the recognition of their constitutional rights and a means to hold the state accountable. Last, I delve into the *Adivasi*-Lambada rift in Telangana to examine the identity politics that emerge when communities lay contesting claims to being 'ST'.

4.3 Scheduled Tribe: An Overview

In this section, I first outline the historical developments that led to the formation and embedding of the term 'ST' to denote the tribal communities of India. The instrument of scheduling has its roots in colonial governance and is defined as 'the act of committing certain

areas to a written list or inventory of “special administrative regimes” where normal laws and regulations prevalent in the rest of British India were not applicable’ (Kapila 2008, 120–21). When India gained her independence in 1947, the Constituent Assembly was established to draft the Constitution of India and Assembly members debated several issues of national importance, one of which was the safeguarding of the interests of the tribal communities in India. The issues of safeguarding tribal interests and administering tribal areas were labelled the ‘Tribal Question’ (Sundar 2008, 156–90). This featured two schools of thought, G.S Ghurye who favoured assimilation (see Dirks 2015; Ghurye 1944; Oommen 2011), and Verrier Elwin, who fought for an isolationist approach which meant separating tribal communities from the rest of Indian society in order to conserve and preserve their culture and identity (see Elwin’s biography by Ramachandra Guha [1999]). As a resolution to the ‘Tribal Question’, the Fifth and Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution was framed to ‘enable devolution of power to the tribals and create autonomous structures that safeguard their traditions and practices ... [and] most importantly, the constitution guarantees protection of their land rights’ (Malhotra 2014). While how one defines ‘traditions and practices’ is somewhat contested and malleable, the issues of rights and property seemed more straightforward to assert. The ‘Tribal Question’ raised a number of political and legal concerns, to which I turn to in the next section.

Alongside the framing of the Fifth and Sixth Schedule, a key principle that underpinned the Constitution of India was the idea of redistributive justice for communities that have suffered exploitation or discrimination (Kapila 2008, 120–21). This culminated to what we know today as The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 and The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950. Together with these orders, a number of articles reflected the idea of redistributive justice for tribal communities were included in the Indian Constitution. For example, protection from social injustice and all forms of exploitation in Article 46; reserved seats for political representation in Articles 330, 332 and 334; the appointment of a Special Officer [later Commissioner] for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes by the President in Article 338; and in Article 342, the President, in consultation with the state governors, can specify which communities are denoted as Scheduled Tribes. Hence, with the framing of the Indian Constitution in 1950, the term ‘ST’ became the official nomenclature of the tribal communities in India, and, with it, the incorporation of constitutional rights and privileges for those communities specified as such.

In her article on the framing of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution, Tewari (2022) captures the dilemmas debated by the two opposing camps. and reframes the Tribal Question as such:

In a nutshell, what has been termed ‘Isolation/Protection’ was the position of the anthropologists who wanted the scheduling of predominantly tribal areas. The nationalists opposed to scheduling constituted the advocates of ‘Intervention/Assimilation’ who wanted to jettison scheduling as an instrument, lock, stock, and barrel (2022, 1564).³⁹

The anthropologists (some of whom might have still been influenced by ‘salvage anthropology’) saw the need to preserve tribal sovereignty in tribal areas and protect tribal communities from the harms of electoral democracy. As for the nationalists, they viewed scheduling as a tool of the British ‘divide and rule’ policy and part of the ‘colonial administrative model that had led to the enduring backwardness of tribal communities’ (Tewari 2022, 1564). Thus, from the onset, there was a politics of scheduling that permeated the framing of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, a tussle between anthropologists and nationalists over how each viewed the ‘tribal’ as part of unique culture to be preserved, or one that needed to be incorporated into the imagined community of the nation. These were the main streams that shaped the administration of tribal communities and tribal areas in postcolonial India: a reconciling of a people endowed with particular rights and as part of the newly created nation state.

The tussle between the anthropologists and nationalists was eventually resolved when the Indian National Congress (INC), the dominant political party after India’s independence, chose to incorporate scheduling as a tool to provide protection for tribal communities. Tewari attributes this to two interlinked factors, Firstly, political consciousness amongst tribal communities began to coalesce due to a resurgence in political movements and insurrections that erupted between 1945-1950 in tribal areas.⁴⁰ This meant that the issue of constitutional rights and legal protections for tribal communities demanded a certain ‘visibility’ in the constitutional dynamics played out between 1947–1950 (Tewari 2022, 1593). Secondly, in order to maintain their state power, the INC chose to incorporate scheduling as a tool to guarantee protection for tribal communities and appeal to their political sensibilities. This,

³⁹ The nationalists were largely represented by members of the Indian National Congress, a ‘united front of anti-imperialist nationalist forces whose top leadership led an independence movement and aimed at the establishment of a sovereign democratic nation-state in India’ (Tewari 2022, 1593).

⁴⁰ In her article, she outlines many political movements and insurrections that erupted in 1945–50 in tribal areas, which were predominantly led by communists (Tewari 2022, 1573–77). For a more detailed account of these movements, please see Satyabrata Rai Chowdhuri’s *Leftism in India, 1917-1947*.

according to Tewari, transformed the INC into ‘a quintessential political ‘party’ engaged in an electoral numbers game in order to capture and maintain state power’ (Tewari 2022, 1593). Hence, scheduling became the main instrument for the administration of tribal communities and tribal areas in postcolonial India.

After India gained independence, the question about the protection of tribal communities and the administration of tribal areas was resolved by the use of scheduling. The historical context of scheduling in India and Tewari’s article on the politics of scheduling point to how tribal agency played a key role in the enshrinement of the Fifth and Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. However, it is also a tool of political expediency as the terms enshrined in these schedules were dictated not by Adivasis, but by leaders in the INC who were interested in keeping their rein on state power. This sets the backdrop of my chapter, where I examine the ST status as both an instrument of governmentality for the state to administer control the Koyas, and an instrument for the tribal communities to claim recognition and enshrine their constitutional rights by the state.

4.4 Scheduled Tribe as Governmentality

In this section, I argue that the ST status constitutes a form of governmentality that allows the Indian state, through its institutions, to define a discursive field which justifies its engagements with the Koyas. This discursive field is encapsulated in the criteria for ST status, where tribal communities continue to be viewed through the lenses of primitivism and backwardness. To illustrate my point, I consider a case study of the Nehru Centenary Tribal Museum and argue that it is a site where the governmentality of the Indian state is explicitly expressed. This is followed by examining the interactions between the Koyas and the ‘everyday state’ to illustrate how the ST status is embedded in Koya identity.

4.4.1 Nehru Centenary Tribal Museum as Site of Governmentality

When I commenced my fieldwork for this thesis, I was told by my friends in Hyderabad that the Nehru Centenary Tribal Museum (NCTM) was going through a renovation, and it should be reopened in about six months. The two-storey NCTM was constructed in 2003 and placed under the supervision of the Tribal Cultural Research and Training Institute (TCRTI), Telangana. It exhibits several artefacts and dioramas to showcase the lifestyles of the tribal communities in Telangana. A library with books pertaining to tribal cultures in India was placed in the same building and made accessible to the public. My first visit to the NCTM was in 2013

when I was doing my Masters of Anthropology in the University of Hyderabad. Back then, I was quite impressed with the number of exhibits in the NCTM and the collection of books in the library. For someone who had only a basic knowledge of tribal communities in Telangana, the NCTM provided a good introduction to the tribal cultures in Telangana. As I was curious about the changes to the NCTM after its renovation, I made a note of visiting it once it was re-opened for the public (see Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3: Nehru Centenary Tribal Museum

When I arrived at the NCTM in January 2019, I was quite disappointed to see that the renovations were still ongoing. A staff of the museum collected 50 rupees from me and told me that I was only allowed to access the exhibits on the ground floor. Not wanting to waste a trip, I stepped into the museum and began scrutinizing the pictures and a couple of dioramas. A while later, the curator of the NCTM, Dr Satya, beckoned me to his office and he talked about the renovations of the NCTM and the projected increase in exhibits, the 17,500 books that will be housed in the new library, and the four other tribal museums under his supervision throughout Telangana. I nodded politely throughout the conversation and after chatting about half an hour, I left the curator's office and continued perusing the exhibits. I was intrigued by the collages of black and white images that were labelled as 'tribal culture' and the dioramas that were exhibited in the NTCM. The images in the collages bore a close resemblance to type photography, a legacy of colonial objectification techniques with its obsession with classifying the 'natives' (see Bate 1993; Sampson and Eleanor 2004). According to Elisabeth Edwards, such depictions 'represented the general form or character which distinguishes a given group

and was accepted as standard' (Edwards 1990, 240). The choice of black and white instead of colour, the absence of the bright cultural wear of tribal communities, the unkempt look on some of these tribal children, helped create a narrative aligned with the ST criteria of tribal communities as primitive, isolated and backward (see also Pinney 1990).



Figure 4.4: Photos of Tribal Culture in NCTM

Also, these images of tribal communities in black and white and labelling them under 'tribal culture', while aesthetically pleasing, helped to reify certain notions, or the 'type', of what tribal communities in India should be. The anthropologist Deborah Poole, in her study on racial thought and the visual technologies of photography and film, writes:

The classificatory conceit of type allowed images of individual bodies to be read not in reference to the place, time, context, or individual human being portrayed in each photograph, but rather as self-contained exemplars of idealized racial categories with no single referent in the world (2005, 163).

Likewise, the 'type' of tribal communities in India is exemplified in these pictures and the dioramas in the NTCM (see Figure 4.5) which are bereft of details and context. As such, there is no alternative image of tribal communities in India. It is entirely possible that these collages were only there temporarily, or further details would be added once the renovations are complete. Yet, it is still a reflection of how the TCRTI 'sees' the tribal communities in India and how they should be represented to the wider population. The Indian state and its arm of preserving tribal heritage and culture is thus reproducing a particular image of tribals – an Orientalist gaze whereby these communities are seen as fixed in time, uncivilised and stuck in their backward ways.



Figure 4.5: Diorama in NCTM Depicting the Tribal Method of Honey Collection

In her article on the depiction of the Mapuche, an Indigenous community, in El Museo Historico Nacional (the Chilean National Historical Museum), Ximena Vial Lecaros discusses how the exhibits on Mapuche culture highlight ‘a Eurocentric narrative... a prioritization of colonial traits in order to present them as the essence for the formation of the nation, leaving Indigenous history as a mere anecdote of the past’ (Vial Lecaros 2022, 161). In a similar fashion, due to the lack of narrative and context of these pictures and figurines on display, the only narrative that emerges is one that reproduces the ST tropes of primitivism, shyness, and backwardness. The curating of these exhibits also reflects how the NCTM is informed by the ST criteria, especially in terms of their anachronistic depictions of the Koyas and other tribal communities in Telangana. These exhibits also shape the perceptions of the wider public in Telangana and perpetuate the tropes of primitivism and backwardness. Furthermore, there is no mention of indigeneity in the NCTM, which, as I have discussed in the earlier chapter, is an important element in narrative that the Koyas are keen to promote as a critical feature of their identity.

4.4.2 The Everyday State: Embedding the ST Status in Koya Identity

In this section, I examine how the ST status is embedded in Koya identity when the Koyas interact with the Indian state. I draw on C. J. Fuller and Véronique Bénéï (2001) term the ‘everyday state’. According to Fuller and Bénéï (2001, 14-15, 22), the ‘everyday state’ does not loom over society like an external actor but is manifest in localised forms and ‘staffed with people with whom some kind of social relationship can or could exist’. In a similar vein, Akhil Gupta (1995, 375) suggests that the state can be studied by analysing the everyday practices

and discursive constructions of the state in public culture. Finally, Ulrich Demmer (2016, 237) in his article on the Jēnu Kuṛumba, an Adivasi community in Tamil Nadu and their practice of everyday politics, observes what he calls the ‘strategies of governmentality and habitualization’ which are deployed ‘by the various institutions of the state and the nation to inscribe the meaning of these institutions in the bodies and the minds of the local people permeate many domains of everyday life’. Overall, the anthropology of the state focuses on the ways in which the state interacts with and influences the lives of individuals and communities, as well as the ways in which people interact with and understand the state. This can include concerns over the role of the state in shaping social and cultural norms, the ways in which the state exercises power and authority, and the impact of state policies on various social groups. The anthropology of the everyday state seeks to probe further and look at the ways in which the state itself is a diverse entity that shapes and is shaped by cultural and social forces, and how it evolves and is experienced across everyday encounters. It often involves the study of governance, bureaucracy (Gupta 1995; Carswell and De Neve 2020) and other political institutions such as the courts, the military and local government bodies, as well how these institutions are shaped by and shape habits, perspectives, and social practices.

Drawing on these scholars, I ask: How do the Koyas interact with the state, experienced as a heterogenous entity across their everyday lives, and how do these interactions shape their sense of identity? In stark contrast to Alpa Shah’s (2007) article on the Mundas keeping the state away, what I found in my own ethnographic work is that the Koyas of Kamaram actively engage the state in their everyday lives, in particular, through government programmes and contributing to their own representation as model and deserving citizens.⁴¹ My findings resonate with Biswaranjan Tripura’s research on the highland people of Tripura, who shows how these communities ‘pursue relations with the state which advance their own advantages and empowerment’ (Tripura 2022, 10). Consider, for example, the case of the afforestation programs announced in 2015, by the Chief Minister of Telangana, ‘Telangana Ku Haritha Haram’. Helmed by the Telangana Forest Department, the aim was to increase forest cover to 33% of the total geographical area of Telangana.

⁴¹ Alpa Shah captures the heterogenous nature of the state: ‘Munda desire to keep the state away is the result of a legitimate sacral polity but also of particular social relations, firstly with exploitative state officials, whom Mundas have had good reason to fear, and secondly with village elites, whose contemporary dominance is maintained through their colonisation of the state (and who therefore actively discourage Munda engagement with the state) (Shah 2007,130). This illustrates how different communities engage and imagine the Indian state in different ways, thus highlighting that the Indian state is never a monolithic and static entity.

For the rural villages of Telangana, tree saplings were distributed and planted on community lands. When the saplings arrived in Kamaram in 2019, the Koyas immediately got to work and cleared the weeds along the paths of Kamaram to plant the saplings (see Figure 4.6). In particular, the youths of Kamaram were instructed by Arjun to take charge of one sapling each. To ensure that they took good care of the saplings under their charge, Arjun stated that each of them will be fined if the saplings do not survive the summer months or are damaged in any way. He added that they are *Adivasis* so they should take pride in caring for the trees. The youths of the village reacted positively to the instructions and happily tagged their names to the saplings. By exhibiting their enthusiasm in the program, they portray themselves as model STs to the state.



Figure 4.6: Koya Villagers Clearing Weeds in Preparation for Planting Saplings

This weaving together of the narrative of being *Adivasi* – the group reinforces the idea that they are in a privileged position of proximity to ‘nature’ through its ancient traditions and culture. To this end, participating in ‘Telangana Ku Haritha Haram’ is an opportunity to demonstrate how the Koyas actively engage with the state, while asserting their own identity. The relationship with the state is not simply about involvement in abstract projects or programs but is also one that permeates everyday encounters, through transforming the very environment they inhabit and experience in their daily lives. Planting trees is an act that reaffirms their bond with nature, as guardians of the land, while also demonstrating their contribution to state projects and the public good.

Since my first fieldwork in Kamaram back in 2013 and during my subsequent fieldwork period, the Koyas of Kamaram have consistently sought to create amicable relationships with

government officials.⁴² This does not mean, they are blind to the way their community has suffered exclusion and denigration in the past, or that they do not resist what they view as injustices past and present. Rather, that their overall strategy is to try and solicit the help of the state, and actively engage government officials to demonstrate their worth, as I have also detailed in Chapter 2. Such active engagement with the state has resulted in what they see as positive developments for Kamaram. Apart from the research centre built for the Koyas to continue their research, every household in Kamaram now has a toilet, and the village has 4G connectivity and electricity. These are indications that the state is rewarding them with improved infrastructure and attention to their plight, hence making them feel validated.

Let me return to the ST status as a key facet of the identity of the Koyas is through what I term as validation. During my fieldwork, my host, Santhosh, wrote a Koya-Telugu dictionary in a bid to promote the learning of Koya language: which the Koyas deemed as an essential aspect of their cultural identity. Apart from being a teacher, Santhosh is also an avid researcher who completed a PhD in English Literature. The Koya-Telugu dictionary was his main project, and he was overjoyed once the dictionary was ready for publication. The moment he received the copies from the publishers, Santosh asked me to accompany him to the Tribal Cultural Research and Training Institute (TCRTI) headquarters in Hyderabad in September 2019. We waited for about an hour before meeting one of the senior officials of TCRTI. When we entered the office, Santhosh handed over copies of the dictionary and talked about how the dictionary will help preserve the traditional Koya language. He also thanked the TCRTI for their support and after taking some pictures, we left and returned to Kamaram (see Figure 4.7). As I pondered over this trip, it made me realise that this visit isn't just about simply giving a dictionary to TCRTI. Rather, Santosh is also seeking a validation from TCRTI as a researcher on tribal language. At the same time, he is actively engaged in the process of identity formation, much of which adheres to ready-made state categories, to which he pours new content.

⁴² This does not mean that the Koyas are rarely critical of the government; rather, they maintain a sense of cordiality.



Figure 4.7: Santosh (Circled in Yellow) with Officials from the Tribal Cultural Research and Training Institute

In the previous section, I have discussed how the role of the NTCM in reproducing a particular image of tribals – an Orientalist gaze whereby these communities are seen as fixed in time, uncivilised and stuck in their backward ways. This gaze is the product of an anachronistic criteria for the STs in India that remains to this day. But it should not be reduced to this alone. Rather governmentality, as Foucault conceived it, works both ways. That is by training individuals to adopt certain behaviours and beliefs, governmental programs (like the museum, planting trees etc) aim to shape the habits, aspirations, and values of the population towards desired outcomes, such as a disciplined citizenship and a productive society. This approach, as described by Foucault, is intended to steer individuals towards "convenient ends." (Ghertner 2015,5). These programs can include education and training initiatives, sanitation and environmental campaigns, or development projects (for example, reservations). The goal is to create a population that is more productive, self-sufficient and able to contribute to the social and economic well-being of the country.

In examining the interactions of the Koyas with the ‘everyday state’ (and its multiple programs), I showed how those have been internalised, for example, taking on the mantle of ST as part of their everyday life and in acting as model citizens. Hence, it is clear that the term ‘ST’ will remain an embedded narrative of Koya identity. Nevertheless, as I sought to emphasise, Koyas are far from passive subjects; rather, they exercise their agency in deploying their ST status to gain advantage or engage activity in celebrating their identity and promoting their cultural heritage, as the dictionary project illustrates. Further, as I elaborate in the following section, the

Koyas are well aware of their political landscape and how they should approach and manipulate the state to achieve their goals.

4.5 Scheduled Tribe as Recognition: Petitioning Ambedkar

In May 2020, I began to receive several pictures over WhatsApp. These pictures showed Koya villagers gathering in front of the portraits and statues of Dr B.R Ambedkar in the villages and towns of rural Telangana. They were holding written petitions in their hands and in the pictures, it showed them submitting the petitions to Dr B.R Ambedkar, the author of the Indian Constitution (see Figures 4.8 and 4.9). When I asked some members of the community about these pictures they sent, they told me that the Supreme Court of India had passed a judgment to scrap Government Order 3 (GO3) in April, which pertains to job reservations for STs. In 2000, the Andhra Pradesh government had passed GO3 to ensure 100% reservation of teacher jobs to people belonging to the ST communities. The rationale of GO3 was to help ‘bolster education infrastructure and development in the scheduled areas, protect the interests of the ST communities and reduce teacher absenteeism in remote areas’ (Sudha, K. and Ramanathan Anjana 2020). However, the Supreme Court of India scrapped GO3 on grounds that 100% reservation is not permissible under the Constitution. When the news of the judgement reached my Koya interlocutors, it was met with great derision as many of them felt that the Supreme Court had ignored their rights provided in the Constitution for ST communities. A flurry of messages began circulating amongst the Koya WhatsApp groups to petition against the Supreme Court decision. A few days later, it culminated in them submitting petitions in front of the portraits and statues of Dr B.R Ambedkar in the villages and towns of rural Telangana. This symbolic gesture spoke volumes, as it resonated across disadvantaged communities in India, many of whom viewed Ambedkar as their champion (Jaoul 2006; Jain 2021) .



Figure 4.8: Submitting Petitions to a Portrait of Dr Ambedkar



Figure 4.9: Submitting Petitions to a Statue of Dr Ambedkar

In this section, I examine this act of petitioning by the Koyas as a form of interaction with the ‘everyday state’. By petitioning to statues of Ambedkar, I suggest that the Koyas are signalling that the Supreme Court is failing to uphold their role as protectors and guarantors of their constitutional rights. I maintain that this strategy of petitions proved effective in deploying their ST status to their advantage and engage in a form of ‘governmentality from below’, as Appadurai termed it, ‘a kind of counter-governmentality animated by the active participation in the politics of knowledge’ (Appadurai 2002, 36). In engaging in petitions, the Koyas are demonstrating their knowledge of constitutional rights and the adequate response when such rights are denied or threatened. Furthermore, these petitions to Ambedkar constitute a creative protest and an adaptive expression of what Koyas regard as their constitutional rights. As I’ll detail, these petitions allow the Koyas to mobilise their ST identity and exercise agency in mounting a campaign to assert such rights.

In India, the usage of petitions can be traced to the 17th and 18th centuries, when ‘petitions to administrative and judicial authorities for the redress of grievances long had been an aspect both of Company rule and in the long-established Presidency towns of Madras, Bombay, and

Calcutta and other “factories” or “trading posts”” (Jaffe 2019, 583). Currently, the tradition of petitioning persists in India and continues to be what De and Travers (2019, 9) called ‘an instrument of centralization, standardization and routinization of political relations’. This is reflected in the previous chapter when I discussed a short vignette of a dharna by Tudum Debba at Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) Eturnagaram. A close reading of the *dharna* discussed earlier reveals how political relations between the ITDA and ST community are constituted and routinised. The dharna resembled an ‘exercise in the public performance of the “political”’ (Kidambi 2019, 207). By sending a senior official from the ITDA to meet the Koya villager, it gave the impression that the petition was treated with a degree of seriousness, befitting the nature of the grievance. It also showed how the Koyas interact with the ‘everyday state’ through petitions and how the petition functioned as a mutually understood mechanism that standardized political relations between the ITDA and the Koyas in Telangana.

4.5.1 The Petition as Mobilisation of Rights and Creative Protest

Having established that the petition is mutually understood mechanism between the Koyas and the ‘everyday state’, I now turn to another key aspect of the petition. Still, petitions are often ignored and fail to elicit a response from the authorities. This was my initial thought when I saw the photos of Koya villagers submitting petitions to the statue of Dr Ambedkar. It struck me as more of a symbolic act with limited efficacy. Nevertheless, in June 2020, the Chief Minister of Telangana ordered his officials to file a review petition against the Supreme Court order to scrap GO3 (The Hindu 2020). Clearly, the Koyas deployed a range of mechanisms to render their voice heard (including protests, sit ins), but petitions were a key strategy to render their plight audible – both in mobilising their own community and engaging the state. Even though the review of the petition is still pending, it does indicate that the submitting of petitions to the statue of Dr Ambedkar by the Koyas is an effective tool that draws on a rich cultural politics deployed by disadvantaged communities across India.

In Nicolas Jaoul’s article on the Dalits and the Ambedkar statues in Uttar Pradesh, he observes, ‘Attention to the meanings associated with symbols like the Ambedkar statues by those who mobilise around them thus assists our understanding of grassroots perceptions of Indian democracy’ (2006, 176). In particular, he shows how these statues are symbols of successful political mobilisations among the Dalits. Similarly, I argue that when the Koyas submit petitions to Ambedkar statues, they are mobilising around their identity as STs – soliciting the help of a larger than life, (and for some communities, saintly) figure associated with India’s

constitutions and champion of the oppressed .When I spoke to Raju, one of the Koyas who posted some of the photos on WhatsApp groups, about this, he said:

Dr Ambedkar wrote the Constitution of India and respected the Adivasis by giving us constitutional rights. But people do not respect his ideology. We appeal to Ambedkar so that people will know that the Supreme Court judgement [to scrap GO3] is not constitutional. With this judgement, there is great damage done to us in terms of education and employment reservations.

Raju's response points to how the Koyas are fully cognisant of their constitutional rights as STs in India. The way in which the Koyas target statues of Dr Ambedkar seems to fit within the framework suggested by Stuart Corbridge and colleagues (2005) to understand state-society relations, captured by the term 'seeing the state'. They maintain that the poor view the state not as a homogenous entity, comprised of institutions which share some sense of unity. Rather, the state is fractious, discontinuous and comprised of various schemes and actors which may or may not be interconnected. This form of 'seeing the state' is shaped by the everyday engagements that the poor participate in, where they learn to deal with low level government officials, political fixers, political parties, and politicians. By extension, the institutions of the state, in this case, the Supreme Court, must consider how these constitutional rights are protected. In addition, these petitions constitute a form of negotiating with the state to recognise their rights. The petitions shown here and the one that I described in the previous chapter, allow the Koyas and the institutions of the state to engage in amicable negotiations.

This strategy of petitions by the Koyas to portraits and statues of Dr B R Ambedkar also reveals how they want to maintain a foothold in the everyday institutions of the state. The wording of the petition (translated from Telugu) is as follows:⁴³

To The Indian President and Prime Minister,

Respected Sirs, The Honourable Supreme Court has judged on 22 May 2020, that GO No.3, is unconstitutional and is impugned. We are kindly requesting you to save and protect the teacher posts belonging to STs of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

As mentioned in the introduction, reservations for government jobs, including teacher posts, are given to those who have ST status. By seeking the protection of these jobs, it reflects the impact of the 'everyday state' in the lives of these Koyas. Here, the desire to become teachers is not merely one of personal interest but influenced by the fact that access to these jobs are linked to the ST status accorded by the state. Under each petition, the full name and the names

⁴³ Translation was done by Santosh, my Koya host.

of the village, mandal, district and state of the petitioner is provided as well. These details are key identifying markers of whether someone is a ST living in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Furthermore, the tone of the petition is not abrasive but deferential. This reflects how the Koyas engage with the state by reminding those in power that as STs, the Koyas have rights and privileges enshrined in the Constitution. It is once again a strategic form of engagement to the extent that confrontation is avoided in favour of a subtle form of dissent so as to remind the authorities of their obligations.

Also, as mentioned in the earlier chapter, these Koyas are voters. These petitions are aimed at political parties who are dependent on their support. It is foreseeable that any political party that takes up this cause will be viewed favourably by the Koyas.⁴⁴ Owing to the pandemic and the strict lockdown rules in Telangana, it was not possible to stage *dharnas* and submit petitions to government officials for over two years. By gathering in rural villages and towns, where movement controls tend to be less stringent, and by sharing the photos via WhatsApp, the Koyas were expressing their creativity in circumventing the limitations caused by the pandemic and garnering support for the petition. Furthermore, their use of WhatsApp allows political mobilisation on a larger scale, which delimits the reach of the petition and, as shown in this example, allows greater participation despite the constraints placed by the pandemic.

In submitting of petitions to Ambedkar statues and portraits in Telangana, the Koyas have demonstrated that they are active citizens of the state, bent on securing their rights. They exercise their agency through mobilising in creative and adaptive ways to ensure that their ST rights are protected. This lends to the overall argument that the ST status is also a strategic narrative for the Koyas of Telangana as they wield it to gain advantages.

4.6 Scheduled Tribe as Identity Politics: The *Adivasi*–Lambada Conflict in Telangana

As mentioned in the previous chapter on *Adivasi*, I attended the celebration of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples at Osmania University. At the event, apart from chatting with Divya, I talked with Mohan, a Koya student at this university. I asked him why the event was not held at the University of Hyderabad. My assumption was that since the University of Hyderabad is one of the state universities in India, this important event should be held there and

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celebrated by the tribal students there as well. Mohan's reply surprised me. He said, 'UOH [University of Hyderabad] has only Lambada students. They are not STs in Telangana and so we do not celebrate with them'. A few days later, I met Dr Kishore, a Koya professor working at Osmania University. We chatted about my research, and I mentioned Mohan's remark that Lambadas 'are not STs in Telangana'. Dr Kishore nodded vigorously and said:

We [Koyas] are here, suppose we are Koya, Koyathoor, Gond. So, if we go to Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and everywhere, we are the original tribals, we are Scheduled Tribes. So, in our country we have the Scheduled Tribe culture; we are *Adivasis*. If you consider these Lambadas, here they are ST, which means that they are tribes. In Maharashtra, the Lambadas are Scheduled Caste; essentially, they are untouchables; in some other place, they are backward caste, and in some other state, they are advanced caste. In India now, this Lambada community is a single community, but they're representing that they are tribes, they are backward castes, they are untouchables, they are forward caste. Compared with us, we, everywhere in India, wherever we go, we simply represent we are *Adivasis*, we have a simple culture.

The Lambadas had a large population in Telangana in 1976. The Congress government, they played a political game. So they promised the Lambada people that if you vote for us, the Congress government will include this Lambada community into tribal community, so that they can try to come up, so that they get the benefits. So that's what happened. So that community is included in this Telangana region. Before that, it was not there in the Schedule. Simply after getting the reservation, they are telling that they are *Adivasis*, or Aborigines or tribes. Before that, they were historically, they are not original, the Lambadas are not original tribes; the Scheduled Tribes itself is a primitive term, that everybody knows. Also, the thing is that on the coastal stretch, they were selling salt, and in Telegu, this salt is called *lavan*. From this word, the word Lambada originated. In this way, they came to settle here, and after 1976, they're getting all the benefits from the government as the Scheduled Tribes.

Through this impassioned speech about the origins of the Adivasi-Lambada rift, Dr Kishore highlighted the contestations that lie within the classification of these communities as STs. According to him, tribal communities such as the Lambadas are being used as pawns in a political game, where their votes were courted through the promise of the ST status. Concurrently, he pointed out how these Lambadas themselves were mis-using the terms and misappropriating the ST status in order to gain advantage over the more deserving Koyas.

Dr Kishore then handed me some documents that showed that in the 1950 Scheduled Tribe List, the Lambadas were not included. Rather, it is only since 1976 that the Lambadas were listed as STs. Moreover, according to Dr Kishore, this re-classification was illegal as the Emergency was declared in 1976 and the proper procedure stated in Article 342 of the Indian Constitution was not followed. Furthermore, with the inclusion of the Lambadas in the ST list in 1976, it led to mass migrations of the Lambadas into Andhra Pradesh, and subsequently Telangana, to take advantage of the reservations. This formed a huge rift between the Lambada community and the rest of the tribal communities, including the Koyas, with the latter accusing the Lambada

community of dominating the reservations. Dr Kishore went on to add that many of the university seats have been taken up by Lambadas and as result, he argued, this has left many of the Koya youths uneducated and unemployed.

Such strategies employed by various castes and tribes to reclassify their communities to benefit from reservations are not unique. As Assa Doron (2013, 2010a) has written with regards to the Nishads of Uttar Pradesh, such petitions were employed during the British Census and well into post-independence years. Other examples include, Moodie's (2015) on her ethnography of the Dhanka community in Jaipur, Sudha Pai and Jagpal Singh's article on the Dalits and the Most Backward Castes competing for reservations in Meerut. With regards to the tribal communities in Telangana, there have been concerted efforts by Adivasi organisations, such as Tudum Debba, to demand for the removal of Lambadas from the ST list in Telangana. On 9 December 2019, the Adivasi organisations held a joint rally in Delhi where thousands of Adivasis from various districts in Telangana attended as a public display of support.⁴⁵ I was unable to attend the rally but, as I viewed the photos circulating in the Koya Whatsapp groups, the Koyas were effusive in their support, either by posting selfies of themselves travelling to the rally, forwarding links to media reports, and by cheering those who were going.

My above conversation with Dr Kishore over the *Adivasi-Lambada* rift and the Delhi rally by *Adivasi* organisations highlights the contentious nature of the ST status, where tribal communities dispute each other's claims to being ST. This underscores the point that even though the ST status is a totalizing nomenclature for tribal communities in India, communities that are granted ST status do engage in gatekeeping and dispute over who should or shouldn't be classified as ST. Of note, these disputes are not unique to Telangana. In 2019, a bill was introduced to include the *Koch-Rajbongshi* community in the ST list of Assam and has led to protests from the existing ST communities in Assam. Similar to the themes that Dr Kishore has raised in the excerpt above, the existing ST communities in Assam dispute the validity of the ST claims by the *Koch-Rajbongshi* community on historical grounds (Sarmah and Hazarika 2020). Hence, being ST is not restricted to being a tool of governmentality for the Indian state, or an assertion of recognition of rights by the Koyas. It can also be used to highlight the identity politics when communities clash over who is ST and who shouldn't be.

⁴⁵ For an overview of the rally and insights from the attendees, please see (Teja 2019)

To clarify, it is not a Koya-Lambada rift, but an *Adivasi-Lambada* one. Despite the Koyas being the largest tribal group in Telangana and lead most of the tribal organisations in Telangana, the characterisation of the rift as ‘*Adivasi-Lambada*’ works in two ways. Firstly, by using *Adivasi* instead of Koya, the Koyas can present a united front in terms of numbers by allying with the remaining tribal groups in Telangana against the Lambadas. This is especially important as the Lambadas account for about 60% of the ST population in Telangana (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2022, 182). Secondly, the Koyas are claiming ‘*Adivasi*’ for themselves and denying that the Lambadas are Adivasis. As outlined by Dr Kishore, they view Lambada claims as disingenuous and seeking access to the ST status and its constituent rights and privileges.⁴⁶ The claims demonstrate that tensions that exist in what is often clubbed together as tribals, but also that a politics of identity thrives when state resources are limited.

In the following section, I want to highlight three related points to show how the ST status manifests a form of identity politics among the tribal communities of India. First, I show that the Koyas use the ambiguity in the ST criteria to their advantage by rejecting the ST claims of the Lambadas on procedural grounds. Then, I suggest that the *Adivasi-Lambada* rift emphasise how the ST status has triggered competition and sharpened ethnic differentiation between communities in India. Lastly, I maintain that the *Adivasi-Lambada* rift foregrounds how the ST status is a tool to be wielded by political parties to gain and maintain power.

4.6.1 Denial of ST Status on Procedural Grounds

When I spoke to Arjun about these competing claims for ST status, he reiterated Dr Kishore’s claim about procedural failure at the time of the Emergency and that the Lambadas took advantage of this loophole. The non-functioning of Parliament during the Emergency meant that there shouldn’t have been any changes to the ST list in any of the states. I found it interesting that Arjun disputed the validity of the ST status of the Lambadas on procedural grounds, using the ‘language of the state’. This is a strategic move on his part as there isn’t any legal or constitutional framework in the specification of the ST criteria. It allows for ambiguity as state governments have sole oversight to periodically include and exclude groups in the ST list. Hence, Arjun (and others who echo his point) are exploiting this ambiguity to argue that the Lambadas should not be classified as STs because their inclusion in the ST list did not

⁴⁶ Regrettably, I wasn’t able to speak to many Lambadas about this rift during the course of my fieldwork. In my conversations with two Lambadas about this issue, both asserted that they are STs and attributed this rift to the inability of the government to provide more jobs for the STs in Telangana. To them, it is an issue of inept governance and once sufficient jobs are provided, the ST status of Lambadas will not be in question.

follow proper procedure. In other words, the identity politics is centred around bureaucratic process rather than recourse to ‘tradition’ or ‘primordial’ connections to ‘nature’, which is deployed in other relevant contexts. It is an exercise of agency capable of strategic discernment that can help Koyas achieve their desired goals.

The anthropologist Jagannath Ambagudia who studies tribal issues in India raises a relevant point here. He writes ‘When exclusion takes place on the basis of historically deprived and socially ascribed identities, inclusion becomes complex, ambiguous and challenging. The critical issue is not whether a group is included but how it is included’ (Ambagudia 2011, 42). In the *Adivasi-Lambada* tensions, the (supposedly) flawed process of inclusion of the Lambadas in the ST list provides the initial justification for the rift. This also reinforces the point that the ST status is an instrument of governmentality by the Indian State, but one that is subject to constant negotiation and contestations.

4.6.2 ST Status as Interethnic Differentiation and Competition

As mentioned earlier, communities continue to vie for ST status in the various states with varying degrees of success. In his article on groups in Darjeeling seeking verification of their ST status, C. Townsend Middletown (2011, 262) points to how ‘competition for ST status and the imperative of cultural distinctiveness have sharpened interethnic differentiation considerably’. This is clearly seen in the Koyas disputing the tribal status of the Lambadas by drawing attention to them being classified as ‘caste’ instead of tribes in other states. In comparison, the Koyas are claiming themselves as the authentic ‘aboriginals’ as they are defined as STs throughout India, hence differentiating themselves from the Lambadas. This is a useful move by the Koyas as the Indian Constitution clearly states that the specification of whether a community is ST or not, is at the sole discretion of the President and in consultation with the Governor of the states and not in the hands of the community. In addition, the Koyas do not view the Lambadas as Adivasis and thus, create an interethnic differentiation between the Adivasi groups and the Lambadas. Here, the denial of the *Adivasi* narrative (by which I mean, the Lambadas are seen as not Indigenous and hence, not qualified as STs) to the Lambadas makes the differentiation even more distinct.

As for competition, I point to Dr Kishore’s comments on how the Lambadas have been taking up reservations in Telangana State. I was unable to find official figures on whether the Lambadas are taking up more reservations as compared to the other Adivasi groups. The

National Commission of Scheduled Tribes 2016 Annual report did provide figures on reservations for bank jobs, government positions and teaching positions allocated for STs in each state, but they do not breakdown further to specify which community were given the reserved positions (National Commission for Scheduled Tribes 2016, 254-264). Still the very perception of Lambada fraudulence (misrepresenting themselves as *Adivasi*) remains a powerful element in the discourse. The figures do show that even though job vacancies are reserved for STs, the number of jobs allocated to STs fall below the constitutionally mandated allocation of 7.5%. This compounds the ire of the Koyas as there are reservations available but those are not afforded to the Koyas. And even when reservations are allocated, the Koyas are claiming that they are given to the Lambadas. To the Koyas, the ST status granted to the Lambadas compounded the problem of unemployment for them and thus, inducing their ire towards the Lambadas. In a recent development, the Telangana government announced that reservation for the Scheduled Tribe communities will increase from 6% to 10% reservations, and this would apply in educational institutions and to services under the state government with immediate effect. However, I would argue that this will not cause the rift to abate. To the Koyas, it is not about more reservations (although the Koyas do welcome the increase in reservations), it is about removing the Lambadas from the ST list in order to gain access to reservations pool. It is not simply about competition over resources, but also over the narrative construction of identity of STs to which the Koyas have multiple claims, including that of being STs.

To conclude this section, I return to Dr Kishore's comments on how the granting of the ST status to the Lambada community is a 'political game played by the Congress Party'. A report released by the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission in 2004 shows an increase in the Lambada population in Telangana since 1976 (Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission 2004,509). Dr Kishore connects this influx of Lambadas to how it creates a sizable voting base for the Congress Party. The claim from Kishore reflects the way in which ST status has also become a political tool to be wielded as a leverage for votes – to boost the voting bank, as is often the case across India. In the previous chapter, I discussed Arjun's political campaign and his bid to be a member of the Lok Sabha. Below I offer two short excerpts, one from his election manifesto and another from one of his campaign speeches. Combined the two give a strong sense of how Arjun – a prominent Koya activist and politician – views the identity politics and its implications for Koya communities:⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Translated from Telugu by me.

Excerpt from Arjun's election manifesto:

When Lambadas illegally get ST certificates, not a single MLA or MP speaks against this injustice. There is no one who fights for jobs for *Adivasis* in our area. *Adivasi* youth are depressed due to unemployment. All the national and regional parties like Telangana Rashtra Samithi Congress and BJP are all supporting the Lambadas by giving them tickets and thereby insulting *Adivasis*. Fear not, as I am contesting in this constituency [Mahabubabad] as the MP candidate! If I win, I will not let any of our *Adivasi* jobs go to the Lambadas!

Excerpt from Arjun's campaign speech:

We should vote only for that party which will ensure the removal of Lambada from ST category. Why should we send puppets? We have sent puppets all these years, but not anymore. We have awareness now, and we aspire for change. Everybody has the weapon of vote in a democracy. We will use that weapon in this election! Let us vote only for that candidate who will be on our side and fight for us.

These short excerpts are examples of how Arjun is leveraging on the *Adivasi-Lambada* rift to garner votes. The emphasis is placed on the illegality of the ST status granted to the Lambadas and he attributes the issue of unemployment faced by *Adivasi* youth to this supposed injustice. He links the removal of Lambadas from the ST list as the key to changing the political landscape in favour of the Koyas. By invoking the image of puppets, he implies that so far the Koyas have manipulated by snide puppeteers (politicians) outside their community and it is an imperative they elect a member of the Koya community to correct past wrongs.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed how being ST has become an integral narrative for the Koyas of Telangana, India. Given its inextricable link with the policy of reservations, the Koyas cannot detach themselves from this bureaucratic term that has been externally imposed on them. Indeed, such classification might be seen as the Indian State efforts to deploy the ST status as a form of governmentality, where access to government aid is solely dependent on whether one is classified by the state as ST. Affirmative action policies are an expression of such governmentality, revealing the ways in which government and power are exercised through the administration and management of society. The policy and nomenclature point to the techniques, practices, and strategies by which state power is exerted over individuals and populations, as well as the ways in which subjects internalize and regulate their own behaviour in response to these power relations. As we have seen, Koyas and Lambadas have sought to regulate their actions and represent themselves in way that respond to such practices and techniques.

I have shown how the Koyas of Kamaram were well aware of the politics of recognition that are central to claims about identity (see also Kapila 2008). The Koyas claimed 'ST' status: an integral part of who they are recognised or 'seen by the state' as such. It conditioned how they interact with the institutions of the state in everyday life. They also knew how to leverage their ST status and ensure that their rights are protected. Thus, the ST status is both part of their identity and meaning making as 'authentic' people of the land, as much as a strategic element in what is a multi-layered narrative that governs Koya identity via the intertwined processes of governmentality and recognition.

Chapter 5: *Jataras* and *Pandugas*: Narratives of Koya Religious Identity

5.1 Opening Vignette

In early November 2018, Sandeep asked me to accompany him to, in his words, ‘collect materials for the Diwali *pooja* and to see how they celebrate Diwali’. Having seen how Diwali (or Deepavali) was celebrated in Singapore, I was keen to learn how the Koyas in Kamaram celebrated the festival. This might also enable me to gain a deeper understanding of their religious identity. On Diwali morning, I met Sandeep outside his home, and we headed off into the forest. We collected wood and vines and went to a small lake to gather lotus flowers. When I asked Sandeep the reason behind collecting these materials, he replied, ‘We will use these materials to make something for the Diwali *pooja*’. We returned to his home soon after and Sandeep’s mum treated me to a delicious breakfast of *idlis*. As I wolfed it down, I realised to my embarrassment that I was the only one eating. I immediately stopped and asked Sandeep whether they were fasting. He replied, ‘Yes. We are fasting today. We will only eat vegetarian food after the *pooja* in the evening. You are our guest, so no problem if you eat, brother’. Upon hearing this, I felt uneasy, but this did not stop me from quickly eating the fresh *idlis*. I then thanked Sandeep’s Mum for her hospitality and left, heading back to my room to write my fieldnotes.

While I was walking back to my room, Mr Rao beckoned me over and invited me to join his family for their Diwali *pooja*. As I entered their home, I saw a picture of Ganesh, a prominent god in the Hindu pantheon, in a small room. Mr Rao brought me into the small room, and in its centre, there was a structure made from organic materials, such as wood, mango leaves and lotus flowers (see Figure 5.1). Coconuts, two oil lamps and two earthen pots were placed in front of the structure. After everyone from Mr Rao’s family was seated in the room, he took out a small booklet written in Telugu and started to recite from it (see Figure 5.2). As he recited, his children sat there quietly and lit small sparklers. At certain junctures of the recitation, some of the family members threw some rice grains at the structure. After about half an hour of the recital, everyone stood in front of the structure. Mr Rao then clasped his hands together, bowed, took a coconut and offered it by breaking it on a rock. The remaining family members did the same, and I was asked to follow suit. I was a bit reluctant at first for I am not an adherent of the Hindu faith. Yet, it was difficult to say no for everyone in the family was looking at me

expectantly. I took the opportunity to ask Mr Rao about this ritual. Mr Rao replied, ‘This *pooja* is called *Kedareswara Vratham*. We do this to worship Lord Shiva. We do this *pooja* so we will be blessed with a good harvest and good health for everyone. You must also do this so you can complete your PhD smoothly’.



Figure 5.1: Structure Made from Materials Collected by Koya Youths



Figure 5.2: Mr Rao (in White) Reciting Mantras

It was a persuasive reply from Mr Rao and an apt opening to the initial phases of my fieldwork. Since I did not want to appear disrespectful, I proceeded to take part in the ritual. It was my first time smashing a coconut and my unsuccessful try drew some laughter from the family members. After two more attempts, the coconut broke in two and I breathed a huge sigh of

relief. I stepped to the side of the room and watched as Mr Rao's wife and his daughter-in-law placed their hands on one of the earthen pots under the structure. After about a minute, the pot turned twice slightly in the clockwise direction. I asked Mr Rao about this ritual, and he replied:

The pot is a place where the spirits of our ancestors reside. The pot will move according to the number and direction that our ancestors desire. The moving of the pot tells us that our ancestors are here to bless us.

The *pooja* ended with this ritual and Mr Rao's wife distributed a sweet pastry to everyone. In the evening, I walked over to Sandeep's place and observed the *Kedareswara Vratham* being conducted in a similar way. I was asked to participate and, thankfully, I could break the coconut on my first try. In the evening, the youths and children of the village started to light sparklers. To cap off the festivities, the Koya elders organised an informal *kabbadi* tournament. It was quite an entertaining affair as the youths formed a team to compete against the older men of the village. The women and children of the village sat together and were thoroughly entertained by the *kabbadi* match. The match lasted for about an hour and marked the end of the Diwali celebrations. When I showed the photos to a Hindu friend and asked about the *Kedareswara Vratham*, she replied that it is a ritual commonly performed by devotees of Shiva during Diwali.

5.2 Introduction

As I pondered over how the Koyas in Kamaram celebrated Diwali and my observation that most of the Koya homes in Kamaram had placed pictures of Hindu deities in their homes, I was convinced that the Koyas in my village were Hindus. The notable exception in Kamaram was my host, Santosh, and his brother Arjun. They did not have pictures of Hindu deities in their homes, and for Diwali, they did not perform the *Kedareswara Vratham*. However, this did not mean that Santosh and Arjun took a militant stance against Hinduism. Although they did not perform this ritual, they were not vehemently against it, nor did the rest of the Koyas see it in a bad light. In fact, Santosh's daughters were invited to join other families for the *pooja*. They were given the sweet pastries and participated in the *kabbadi* game. After the Diwali festivities, I asked Santosh whether he and his brother are Hindus, and he replied assertively, 'We are not Hindus. We believe in *Koya Punem* (a term that translates to Koya religion) only. We have our own gods'.

When I heard this reply from Santosh, my initial assumption was that he had expressed his own articulation of Koya religious identity, which did not detract from the fact that many or even most Koyas in Kamaram were celebrating Hindu festivals and worshiping Hindu gods. After

all, it is common for people within the same community to hold differing opinions on religion. However, as my fieldwork progressed, I realised that things were not as straightforward as regards to the religious identity of the Koyas. Whenever I broached the subject of religion with the Koyas of Kamaram, they would tell me that they are Hindus and that they also worship Koya deities. This does not mean that they were equating *Koya Punem* with Hinduism. Rather, the Koyas seemed to draw a clear distinction between the two religions. This was especially salient as I observed how the Koyas in Kamaram articulate their religious identity through celebrating Koya *Jataras* and *Pandugas*, alongside Hindu festivals such as Diwali. Clearly, the Koyas are not a homogenous entity, and this was evident with how people chose to practice their religious beliefs. But there was something interesting taking place as far as religious sentiments were concerned, a kind of free-flowing interaction between *Koya Punem* and Hinduism. This kind of hybrid practice is what I suggest constitutes part of the narrative of religious identity among the Koyas of Kamaram. It is a narrative that is carefully constructed through a range of memories, myths, and demonstrated and reproduced in practice, as I examine below.

In this chapter, I focus on this interaction between *Koya Punem* and Hinduism to ask: ‘How do the Koyas of Kamaram articulate their religious identity?’ To address this question, I first explore the articulations of *Koya Punem* through three Koya festivals—the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara, Remakka Relakka Jatara and Karukonda Sadalamma Panduga.⁴⁸ By analysing these festivals, I make the following observations. First, these Koya festivals serve as sites of social memory and are an important conduit in preserving and expressing *Koya Punem* in India today. I will highlight how these three festivals differ from each other, and in so doing, draw out the different narratives that constitute Koya religious identity. As a corollary, I show that these Koya festivals serve as sites of contestation and appropriation. For instance, the biennial Sammakka Saralamma Jatara is an important festival for the Koyas. Coupled with the pervasive influence of Hinduism in the region, it has led to the commonplace perception that this *Jatara* is a Hindu festival and thus that the Koyas are ‘naturally’ Hindus. This perception disputed by some Koyas as who view these festivals as key markers of *Koya Punem* and therefore, reject the notion that their community are adherents of Hinduism. This debate over whether Koya festivals are part of the Hindu fold lends itself to larger issues concerning the religious identity of the Koyas.

⁴⁸ The first is also known as ‘Sammakka–Saralamma Jatara’ and ‘Medaram Jatara’.

As I demonstrate in this chapter, the religious domain of the Koyas is capacious enough to allow the dynamic interaction between two seemingly distinct religious traditions—which the anthropologist Marriott (1955) calls the Great and Little Traditions. Certainly, this dual framework has been justly criticised for prioritising the Hindu religion and casting all others as derivative, thus robbing agency from those who practice and may value both (Doron 2006, see also Lukens-Bull 2005; Van der Veer 1988). A more ethnographically sensitive way to conceptualise this integration of dynamic and plural traditions is offered by Vineeta Sinha’s (2009, 97), an anthropologist studying everyday Hindu religiosity in Singapore. She uses the term ‘mixing and matching’ to describe how Hindus in Singapore interact and integrate Hindu and Taoist traditions in their everyday religious practice—a term that signifies ‘a process of picking, choosing and enacting a style of religiosity preferred by a practitioner’ (Sinha 2009, 97).⁴⁹ This process creates a scenario ‘where diverse (and sometimes contradictory) components of ritual behaviour and thinking co-exist without trauma’ (Sinha 2009, 97). Likewise, I argue that the Koyas of Kamaram also engage in a process of ‘mixing and matching’ in articulating their religious identity. They do not discard their Koya Punem for Hindu festivals, nor do they view themselves as being ‘Sanskritised’ or emulating upper-caste behaviour (Srinivas 1966, 6).⁵⁰ This articulation of Koya religious identity is one that accommodates a religiosity that allows them to draw on various religious practices from the traditions of *Koya Punem* and Hinduism. Such considerations seem to also cohere with Somers’s (1994) argument of a narrativised identity that draws on multiple religious practices and discourses.

As I will illustrate in the following sections, Koya identity is dynamic and open to contestations, appropriations and change. While Koya traditions and Hinduism are both diverse, dynamic and subject to interpretations, throughout this thesis I have maintained that some key actors push for particular representations and practices of these traditions, as teachers or Koya activists. For example, in Chapter 2, I showed that the IKK project has served to cement Koya identity as *Koitur*, whereas in this chapter, my primary concern is on the practice of mixing and matching.

Before discussing the *Jataras* and *Pandugas*, I provide a brief overview of the religious life of the Koyas. In their everyday religious practices, the Koyas worship the deities Mamili,

⁴⁹ This concept of ‘mixing and matching’ echoes Claude Levi-Strauss’s concept of bricolage, which was first formulated in his 1962 book, *The Savage Mind* and refers to the appropriation of pre-existing materials that are at hand to create something new.

⁵⁰ The term ‘Sanskritisation’ was coined by Srinivas (1966) to describe how ‘a low or middle Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently twice-born caste’.

Kommamma, Katurudu, Adamaraju, Korra Raju, Mutyalamma and Kudidevara (TCRTI 2018). Ancestor worship is also prevalent among the Koyas. In this chapter, I mainly focus on the deities worshipped in the *Jataras* and *Pandugas*. I begin with the definitions of *Jatara* and *Panduga*, which are important in this context. According to Brown's (1903) *A Telugu-English Dictionary*, *Panduga* is 'a feast or festival, a treat'. In P Percival's (1862) *Telugu-English Dictionary*, *Jatara* is defined as 'the festival of any deity, but mainly of the village goddess'.⁵¹ Although both words broadly refer to festivals, it is highly unlikely that a Koya would refer to the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara as a *Panduga*. For the Koyas, *Jataras* are organised around temples and are larger in scale. For example, in 2018, it was reported that 1.2 crore or 12 million devotees attended the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara.⁵² As for *Pandugas*, they are much smaller in scale and are mostly celebrated in villages, such as '*Bhumi Panduga*' (translates to Land or Seed festival) that celebrates the beginning of the agricultural season. These definitions are important as they allow us to see how Koya festivals accentuate Koya religious identity in different ways. *Jataras*, due to their larger scale in terms of numbers and duration, create the space and opportunity for the Koyas to express *Koya Punem* as their religious identity on a community level. As for *Pandugas*, they allow the Koyas to express *Koya Punem* as their religious identity on an individual level.

5.3 Sammakka Saralamma Jatara: Contestations of Koya Religious Identity

I begin with the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara, a four-day biennial festival that attracts millions of tribal and non-tribal devotees from Telangana and other states, such as Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. The myth of Sammakka originates from the 13th century when some Koyas found an infant girl emitting a bright light as she played amid tigers in the forest. A Koya chief adopted her and she subsequently married Pagididda Raju, the tribal chief of the Koyas. She gave birth to two daughters, Sarakka and Nagulamma, and a son, Jampanna.⁵³ When King Prataprudra of the Kakatiyas imposed harsh taxes on the Koyas during a drought, the Koyas refused to pay, and a war ensued between the Kakatiyas and the Koyas. Pagididda Raju, together with his daughters, his son, and his son-in-law, Govinda Raju (husband of Sarakka), fought valiantly against the Kakatiyas but perished in battle.

⁵¹ *Jatara* is recorded as '*Dzatara*'.

⁵² Despite the onset of the pandemic, about 1 crore or 10 million devotees were in attendance for the 2020 Sammakka Saralamma Jatara.

⁵³ Another name for Saralamma is Sarakka.

Jampanna was killed near a stream, and it was believed that his blood turned the stream red. Today, the stream is called ‘Jampanna Vaagu’ and is one of the key sites of the *Jatara*.

Upon hearing about the death of her husband and children, Sammakka went into battle and fought heroically against the Kakatiya armies. However, she suffered serious wounds and had to retreat. Sensing that she could not fight any longer, she told the Koyas that as long as they remembered her, she would protect them. She cursed the Kakatiya dynasty and walked towards a hill, ‘*Chilakala Gutta*’, before disappearing into the forest. The Koyas tried to search for her body but only found a red ochre box, her bangles and the pug marks of a tigress at the same spot where she was found as an infant. To commemorate Sammakka and her bravery, the Koyas have held the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara in the town of Medaram, Telangana, once every two years.

The myth of Samakka is a key element in expressing Koya identity as it highlights values and meaning connected to kinship, conjugal relations, children and women. The battle against the Kakatiya kings presents a powerful narrative of resistance and sacrifice that is bonded by kinship. This is especially pertinent for the Koyas who have faced various forms of marginalisation and discrimination throughout history. In celebrating the Jatara, it is not merely a worship to the goddesses, but also a manifestation of their collective identity and faith. I will elaborate further on how the Jatara is a site of social memory for the Koyas. For now, I focus on the cultural politics and the structure of events to highlight the contestations and appropriations that have emerged as the Jatara gained popularity.

The Sammakka Saralamma Jatara begins on a full moon day in February. As a prologue, the ‘Manda Melige Panduga’ takes place about a week before the *Jatara*. The Sammakka temple at Medaram, the Saralamma temple at Kannepalli and the Pagididda Raju temple at Punugondla are cleaned thoroughly by Koya priests. Then, the priests decorate the temple arches with mango leaves and sacrifice hens to ward off evil spirits. These male Koya priests belong to specific clans and are selected by their respective clan elders. For example, priests of Siddaboina and Chanda clans performed the rituals at the Sammakka temple, while priests of Kaka clan performed the rituals at the Saralamma temple. The Manda Melige Panduga is completed within a day and serves as an indication that the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara is about to begin.

A summary of the key events on the four days is as follows. On the first day of the *Jatara*, a procession carrying the flag of Pagididda Raju starts from the Pagididda Raju temple in Ponugondla village (see Figure 5.3). Concurrently, another procession carrying the flag of Govinda Raju starts to move from a temple in Kondayi village. Both processions head towards the main temple in Medaram. After they reach it in the evening, the flags are placed in the temple premises. The highlight of the first day is the third and final procession bringing Saralamma from her temple in Kannepalli. After performing some rituals at the Saralamma temple in Kannepalli, Koya priests carry Saralamma in a red cloth in a new bamboo basket and head towards Medaram. As the Saralamma procession leaves Kannepalli village, people express their devotion by pouring water and sprinkling turmeric and vermilion on the feet of the priests. Of note, a flag of Hanuman precedes the Saralamma procession (see Figure 5.4).



Figure 5.3: Flag of Paddiga Raju (Husband of Sammakka)



Figure 5.4: Flag of Hanuman (Circled in Yellow) in front of the Saralamma temple

The presence of Hanuman in the form of a flag piqued my curiosity. When I talked to a Koya about this, he mentioned that Hanuman is a tribal deity and the companion of Saralamma. This alludes to the popular Hindu characterisation of Hanuman as a companion of Ram. A book released by the TCRTI (2018, 30) states that Hanuman is ‘considered to be the maternal uncle of Saralamma’. When I showed this photo to Akash, a close friend and a Gond researcher on tribal issues, he was surprised to see, in his words, ‘a Hindu icon in a tribal festival’. He went on to show this photo to his Koya friend and sought his opinion. His Koya friend replied that the appearance of Hanuman in the *Jatara* began only in the 1990s and coincided with the *Jatara* being declared a state festival by the ruling party. He also stated that it was this declaration of the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara as a state festival that led to its popularity among the non-Koyas. According to him, this insertion of a Hindu deity eventually led to the influence of Hinduism on the *Jatara* and fuelled its popularity to extend well beyond the Koya community.

As observed, there are multiple and contesting narratives that emerge and point to how a Koya *Jatara* can be a site of contestations. I will discuss this issue in section 5.6, but for now, I continue with the summary of the events. Upon reaching the temple in Medaram, Saralamma is placed on her ‘*gadde*’ (altar) and is represented by bamboo poles smeared with vermilion and turmeric powder. On the second day, Koya priests climb ‘Chilkala Gutta’ and bring Sammakka in the form of a vermilion box. Similarly, a procession is formed around Sammakka and make its way towards the temple at Medaram. The Koya priests helming the processions are male and belong to the clans of Pagididda Raju, Govinda Raju, Saralamma and Sammakka. The roles are inherited, and this reinforces the notion of kinship and continuity in *Koya Punem*,

where the religious identity of the Koyas is tied to the clan identity. When Sammakka's procession reaches the temple at Medaram, the superintendent of police fires three shots in the air as an offering to the goddess and as a signal to the devotees that Sammakka has reached her *gadde* in Medaram. According to the Koyas, this practice of firing shots in the air by the police emerged in the late 90s, when the state government began to be more involved in the running of the Jatara. Like Saralamma, the vermilion box is placed on bamboo poles smeared with vermilion and turmeric powder to represent Sammakka (see Figures 5.5 and 5.6).



Figure 5.5: Sammakka on her *Gadde*



Figure 5.6: Saralamma on her *Gadde* (Photo Credit for both photos: TCRTI)

The third day of the *Jatara* is considered its busiest day because thousands of devotees throng the temple to worship Sammakka and Saralamma all day and night. The devotees wash themselves in 'Jampanna Vagu' before going into the temple to offer jaggery, money and saris to the goddesses.⁵⁴ It is believed that if one offers the quantity of jaggery equivalent to one's body weight, one's wishes will be fulfilled. Other offerings include money, saris and jewellery. In addition, devotees sacrifice hens and goats in their villages or along the procession route. They then cook and eat these animals and for the Koya men, they freely consume alcohol during the *Jatara*. On the fourth and final day, the *Jatara* is concluded with processions leading the goddesses back to their respective temples.

In this overview of the *Jatara*, I draw attention to the consumption of meat and alcohol that presents a counter-narrative to those who seek to define the *Jatara* as 'Hindu'. Gopal Guru (2009,10) writes, 'cooked food or food practices provide cultural criteria in assigning cultural identity to a certain social section in the society'. The consumption and distribution of meat is a marker of identity in the subcontinent and at times, has led to tensions and even conflicts (see

⁵⁴ The offering of jaggery is known as '*Bangaram*', which signifies an offering of gold to the goddesses.

Sur 2022; Sarkar and Sarkar, 2016, Sathyamala 2019, D.M Jha 2002).⁵⁵ Shraddha Chigateri, in her article on beef eating in India, writes, ‘The food hierarchy in India suggest an order of superiority that goes down from vegetarianism, meat-eating (no beef) to beef-eating... which also corresponds to a broad classical caste hierarchy, with the Brahmins at the ‘top’ and the Dalit communities at the ‘bottom’ (2008, 19-20). As such, the consumption of meat is often associated with non-Brahmanical or low caste communities. Doron (2010b, 283), in his article on alcohol consumption amongst the boatmen of Banares, highlights how the colonial authorities and upper-caste Hindus ‘produced the stereotype of the drunken and unruly boatman, in which alcohol was to a large extent the meta-sign: indicating the moral laxity of the boatman caste as a whole and its inherent criminal proclivities’. The consumption of alcohol, like meat eating, is thus another social marker of non-Brahmanical or low caste communities. As the consumption of meat and alcohol is acceptable at the *Jatara*, it reinforces the narrative of the *Jatara* being a Koya festival and further distinguishes it from a Hindu festival.

5.4 Sammakka Saralamma Jatara as Site of Social Memory

Having given an overview of the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara, I move on to an analysis of the *Jatara* and how it pertains to the religious identity of the Koyas. When I talked to the Koyas in Kamaram about the *Jatara* and its appeal, a common refrain I often heard was ‘Sammakka and Saralamma are our Koya goddesses. We remember how she fought for us and her protection over us’. This refrain highlights two interesting points. First, the *Jatara* is an assertion of *Koya Punem*. Durkheim (2008) describes how religion serves to create a sense of community and to affirm bonds between members. The celebration of the *Jatara* once every two years helps to consolidate the Koyas’ religious identity through facilitating a sense of collective effervescence (Durkheim 2008). By coming together at the *Jatara* over four days, they are united as a community as they celebrate and pay homage to their goddesses. Nevertheless, I suggest that the *Jatara* goes beyond an expression of *Koya Punem*. Rather, it serves as a site of social memory for the Koyas. Here, I draw on Connerton’s (1989) book *How Societies Remember* in which he writes, ‘images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order ... participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory’ (1989, 3). Thus, this shared, or social, memory of a community plays a key role in shaping the cultural identity of its members. In

⁵⁵ Historian Dwijendra Narayan Jha’s (2004) seminal work, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, presents indisputable evidence that the ancient Indians ate beef, and the practice of vegetarianism had continued alongside an on-going practice of meat-eating since time immemorial.

arguing that the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara is a site of social memory, I also show how the *Jatara* speaks to the values, fears and aspirations of the Koyas.

Such values and aspirations are embodied in the ritual and mythological story that inform Koyas' religious identity. Connerton's concept of social memory is relevant here, where memories are constituted by commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices (1989, 4). Connerton suggests that commemorative ceremonies have a master narrative that reminds the community of its identity and that it is 'more than a story told and reflected on; it is a cult enacted' (1989, 43). The term 'cult enacted' refers to how the narrative is re-presented in the present and connects the participants to a past: a re-enactment. As mentioned in the earlier section, the *Jatara* emphasises the bravery of Sammakka in fighting against the injustice faced by the Koyas. It aligns with the discussion in Chapter 4 about the Koyas being made aware of the issues facing their community through the activism of Tudum Debba. In celebrating the *Jatara* once every two years, the Koyas are constantly being reminded of this overarching narrative, which is re-enacted and celebrates their identity as Koyas.

As for bodily practices, according to Connerton, they are key to sustaining the social memory of a community:

Many forms of habitual skilled remembering illustrate a keeping of the past in mind that, without ever adverting to its historical origin, nevertheless re-enacts the past in our present conduct. In habitual memory the past is, as it were, sedimented in the body (1989, 72).

By celebrating the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara once every two years, it serves as a consistent reminder of the memories of Sammakka and Saralamma. This establishes a continuity with the past, which is reified by repetitive rituals. Furthermore, these rituals involve certain bodily gestures that, as Connerton reminds us, as 'culturally specific cultural performances [that] provide us with a mnemonics of the body' (1989, 74). By making the trip to Medaram once every two years, purchasing one's weight in jaggery and offering the jaggery to the goddesses, dipping one's body into the Jampanna Vagu, and following the processions of the goddesses to the temple, all these bodily gestures, performed at regular times and over long periods, allow for the past to be amassed, or sedimented into the Koyas ritual economy.

Social memory has other attributes too, according to the historian who studied African American and Southern history, Scot A. French, social memory 'focuses on the construction of group boundaries, a process that reveals the multiplicity of meanings individuals attach to shared experiences and the intense struggles that take place within groups over what to

remember and what to forget' (1995, 17). In remembering and commemorating what Sammakka has done for the Koyas, it further reinforces their group identity, thus emphasising how the *Jatara* goes beyond a religious festival. This is further exemplified by how the processions of the Sammakka and Saralamma are carried out only by Koya priests. Also, as I illustrate later, the Koya youth organisations play an integral role in facilitating the smooth running of the *Jatara*. Thus, the Sammakka Saralamma *Jatara* is more than a religious festival for the Koyas. It is a site of social memory that is sustained by commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices. Finally, Olick and Robbins (1998, 133) into memory-making are instructive. For them memory, 'is a central, if not the central, medium through which identities are constituted'. Hence, as a site of social memory, the Sammakka Saralamma *Jatara* plays an integral role in defining Koya religious identity. However, as I illustrate in later sections, it is also subject to appropriations and contestations. This further lends to my key argument that Koya religious identity is a narrativised identity that draws on religious practices and discourses.

5.5 Encountering the State through the Sammakka Saralamma *Jatara*

In this section, I discuss how the state is present in a very intimate fashion in the everyday lives of the Koyas. Here, I examine how the Koyas make sense of the Telangana State's involvement in the Sammakka Saralamma *Jatara* and the contestations that emerge. Here, I draw from Akhil Gupta's extensive work on the relationship between the state and society. In his influential article, 'Blurred Boundaries' Gupta (1995) critiques the conventional understanding of the state as an external entity that exists above and apart from society. Instead, he argues that the state is best understood as a 'social formation' that is produced and reproduced through the everyday practices and interactions of people within society. According to Gupta, the state is not a monolithic entity but is composed of multiple, overlapping and often conflicting interests, power relations, and practices. He emphasizes that the state should be analysed not just as a political or institutional structure but also as a site of cultural and symbolic production.

Gupta's concept of the state highlights the social and cultural dimensions of state power and argues that the state should be seen not just as an external entity but as a product of the everyday practices of people within society. As regards to the anthropological analyses of the state, Sharma and Gupta (2006, 27) have argued for the need to understand the workings of the state across various domains of everyday life. As they observe:

the cultural constitution of the state – that is, how people perceive the state, how their understandings are shaped by their particular locations and intimate and embodied encounters with state processes and officials, and how the state manifests itself in their lives.

Taking my cue from them, I illustrate how the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara serves as an ethnographic location where the Koyas encounter the state on an intimate level and where the discursive construction of the state is amplified in the lives of the Koyas. By intimate, I refer to how on a quotidian level, the Koyas interact closely with the various functionaries of the state – not as a distant monolith but rather as a diverse entity. Fuller and Hariss (2000, 22) remind us that the state is not a ‘discrete unitary actor that is separated from society’. Consider, for instance, how the Koyas of Kamaram would visit the ITDA to resolve land disputes or request information on government schemes, or how they would be reminded of the manner that the state protects them through the police post—a four-storey structure, fully barricaded with barbed wires and occupied by policemen armed with sub-machine guns—located in Tadvai.⁵⁶ More still, this encounter with the state through its management of the *Jatara* has created its own sets of contestations pertaining to Koya religious identity. Rubbing against the state is routine, something I have also shown in my discussion of the education system, from university admission process to the youth hostels.

Let me further illustrate what I mean by ‘encountering the state’ on an intimate level by focusing on the workings of the *Jatara* and how it is managed by local government officials. In January 2018, it was reported that the Telangana State Government had allocated ₹80 crore, or 800 million rupees, for the arrangements for the *Jatara*.⁵⁷ These arrangements range from improving infrastructure in and around Medaram and providing amenities, such as additional bus services, medical camps and waste disposal facilities. The impact of this expenditure was evident during my visit to the *Jatara* in 2018. I was initially overwhelmed by the sheer number of devotees and the bustling activity at Medaram. There were people selling food, jaggery, live chickens, goats and various paraphernalia. There were also liquor stalls throughout the *Jatara* site. For the youths and children, a carnival coupled with game stalls, a Ferris Wheel and various rides was set up near the main *Jatara* site. Buses carrying devotees from different parts of Telangana and neighbouring states swooped in and out of Medaram at a dizzying pace.

Despite the large crowds, there was a sense of order and direction. There were display boards to direct the devotees to the various areas of the *Jatara*. Several public information centres

⁵⁶ As mentioned in Chapter 1, Tadvai is the town located 3 km from the village and is the main bus hub for the people heading towards Hyderabad or other urban towns in Telangana.

⁵⁷ ₹80 crore is approximately equivalent to AUD\$14.5 million.

helmed by government officials from the Tribal Welfare Department were set up to deal with inquiries from the devotees. Police officers helped to maintain order by directing traffic to ensure the smooth movement of devotees within the main temple site, and enforcing strict rules on waste disposal and cleanliness. The Telangana State Road Transport Corporation had provided additional buses to fetch devotees from different parts of the state. Areas for accommodation, food and the selling of paraphernalia were clearly demarcated. There were medical camps at various points of the *Jatara* site to provide medical assistance. I was particularly impressed by the patience that the devotees exercised while waiting to pay homage to the goddesses at the temple. For some, it meant standing in line for three hours. Despite the long wait and the seemingly chaotic atmosphere as people moved from place to place, the overall atmosphere of the *Jatara* was vibrant and festive. As I observed the friendly and cordial interactions between the Koyas, the police, and government officials in the *Jatara*, I was reminded of Gupta's (1995) point that it is through these everyday practices and interactions, that the state is co-created and maintained, with the enforcement of laws and regulations serving as just one example of how state power is exercised through the actions of people within society.

A key highlight of every Sammakka Saralamma *Jatara* is the arrival of high-level politicians to Medaram. In 2018, the Vice President of India, Sri Venkaiah Naidu, the Chief Minister of Telangana, Sri Kalvakuntla Chandrashekar Rao, popularly known as KCR, and the then Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh, Sri Raman Singh, attended the *Jatara*. Accompanied by their personal entourages of police men and soldiers, they were escorted directly into the temple, bypassing the long queues. Clad in their traditional white garb, they paid homage to the goddesses by offering their weight in jaggery (see Figure 5.7). After completing the rituals, they walked around Medaram to inspect the arrangements and left after about a few hours. The arrival of these politicians and their participation in the *Jatara* is often met with enthusiastic response from the devotees at the *Jatara*. While it reflects an appreciation of the religious traditions of the Koyas, it also emphasises how the state, as represented by these politicians, is revealed in multiple ways. Here, it is revealed as a remote entity that reinforces a top-down performative state, where the politicians are viewed as guests of honour and given preferential treatment.



Figure 5.7: KCR being Weighed in Jaggery (Photo Credit: TCRTI)

Through the state's provision of all these amenities and its ensuring the smooth functioning of the *Jatara* by coordinating across different government departments, the Koyas experienced how the state (both as remote and everyday) was fulfilling its responsibility towards them in a direct and intimate manner. Every aspect of the *Jatara*, from devotees' arrival and accommodation to their worshipping the goddesses, policing of queues and a smooth return to their homes, was meticulously handled by government bodies. Furthermore, the management of the *Jatara* by the various government bodies does not mean that the Koyas were detached from the *Jatara*. Rather, Koya volunteers were deployed during the *Jatara* in various ways. One of their key roles was to escort the Sammakka and Saralamma processions from their respective temples to the temple in Medaram. These processions were often a chaotic affair for devotees would rush in front of the procession to pay homage to their goddesses. To ensure that the goddess would reach the temple in Medaram on time, an outer cordon was formed with burly police and army officers holding a rope. Then, an inner cordon was formed by Koya volunteers around the Koya priests carrying the goddess. Volunteers, and police and army officers were interspersed between the two cordons. In front of the outer cordon, police officers would clear the way for the procession to move by blowing loud whistles and gesturing at devotees to move out of the way.

When I described what I saw to my host, Santhosh, he commented that this has taken place in every *Jatara* and demonstrated how Koyas can work well with, and alongside the officials. He added further, 'We (the Koyas) depend on the Indian state to provide infrastructure and resources, but this dependency does not mean acquiescence. Rather, the state recognises the autonomy of the Koyas over their culture, beliefs and practices'. This comment reflects the

complex ways in which the Koyas encounter the state through the *Jatara* and their expectations and attitudes. On one hand, the Koyas do recognise and appreciate the government's contributions in providing the infrastructure and helping to ensure the smooth functioning of the *Jatara*. It would have been an impossible task to accommodate the large number of devotees without intervention from the government and its institutions. On the other hand, some Koyas also expressed some caution regarding this all-encompassing embrace by the state. There are suspicions that the embrace of the state could lead to Koyas being robbed of their own agency in organising the *Jatara* and expressing their unique identity.

This was expressed in the latter part of Santosh's comment where he highlights the contestations that emerge through this encounter. In providing infrastructure for the *Jatara*, the Telangana Government has also made it accessible to more people, resulting in the increase in its popularity. Yet, it is the provision of infrastructure, often taken for granted and considered ordinary, that is of interest here. Susan L. Star, in her agenda-setting article on studying infrastructure with the tools of ethnography, highlights the 'imbrication of infrastructure and human organisation' (1999, 379). Brian Larkin pays attention 'to the formal dimensions of infrastructures, understanding what sort of semiotic objects they are, and determining how they address and constitute subjects, as well as their technical operations' (2013, 329). In following Star and Larkin, I consider the provision of infrastructure by the state as a means to address and constitute the Koyas as its subjects. Here, Anand's (2011) article on the water infrastructure in Mumbai serves as an interesting point of comparison. He writes about how settlers in Mumbai mobilise various ways to obtain water and, in so doing, produce 'hydraulic citizenship—a form of belonging to the city made by effective political and technical connections to the city's infrastructure' (Anand 2011, 545).

Similarly, I suggest that as the Koyas utilise the infrastructure (electricity, sanitary amenities, transport facilities, crowd control, etc) provided by the Telangana government, the Koyas are also engaging in a process of co-creating citizenship. This lends to the broader point made by Gupta (1995) that the state is reproduced via the interactions and practices of people within society. I draw attention to Santosh's observation in which he said that 'dependency does not mean acquiescence'. This comment highlights the tensions simmering as the state continues to extend its reach over the *Jatara*. For example, in recent years, there have been calls by politicians, from the ruling party Telangana Rashtra Samithi, and opposition parties, including those from the BJP, to make the *Jatara* a national festival. Some of the Koyas in Kamaram regard this demand as a form of political expediency by political parties to garner votes from

tribal communities. It may also mean their community will lose control over how, when and where the festival is organised. In another conversation with Santosh, he remarked, ‘Why would we want our *Jatara* to be a national festival? Sammakka and Saralamma are our goddesses, and we do not need other people coming in’. This comment perhaps reflects a fear that state-sponsored Hinduism will overrun more ‘local’ traditions through, for instance, educational institutions and infrastructural arrangements that both enable and constrain more ‘local’ expressions of Koya identity. It expresses a desire of the Koyas to maintain their autonomy over the *Jatara*, which they saw as being appropriated by certain political agents and state functionaries. This appears to indicate that the Koyas do welcome state intervention in the *Jatara* to a certain degree, so long as it does not undermine what they regard as key markers of their religious identity.

It is interesting to examine how the Sammakka Saralamma *Jatara* has become a site where the Koyas encounter the state as a heterogenous entity comprising various functionaries, and in an intimate way that can potentially be overbearing and threatening. This resonates with what Michael Herzfeld called ‘cultural intimacy’, defined as ‘the recognition of those aspects of an officially shared identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality’ (2005, 7). Herzfeld elaborates that ‘people recognize as familiar, everyday phenomena some of officialdom’s most formal devices, and this generates active scepticism about official claims and motives’ (2005, 8). In this context, the state, through its involvement in the *Jatara* and its provision of infrastructure, recognises the ‘tribal’ identity of the Koyas, one that is imbued with static representations of primitivism.⁵⁸ As for the Koyas, they greet this provision of infrastructure with some degree of scepticism. Such dynamics have generated tensions and led to contestations and fears that Koya religious identity is being deployed for various ends, a view that I will examine in the next section.

5.6 Sammakka Saralamma *Jatara* as Site of Contestations

When I was walking around Medaram on the third day of the *Jatara*, I chanced upon a stall selling picture frames of Sammakka and Saralamma. My interest was immediately piqued as both Koya goddesses were depicted in a similar fashion as the Hindu goddess Durga in calendar art (see Figures 5.7 and 5.8). I bought a small picture frame and showed it to Santosh. He gave

⁵⁸ I refer to Chapter 1 of this thesis in which I discuss how certain tropes of primitivism and backwardness continue to be reified by the Indian State.

it a look of derision and said, ‘This is not right. How can Sammakka ride on the tiger and her daughter [Saralamma] ride on a deer? Won’t the tiger eat the deer? This Hindu representation of our Koya gods is wrong!’



Figure 5.8: Picture depicting Sammakka (right) and Saralamma (left)



Figure 5.9: Picture of Hindu Goddess Durga (Photo Credit: Google Images)

The derisive reply to the representation in Figure 5.8 of Sammakka and Saralamma highlights the *Jatara* as a site of contestation over Koya religious identity and representation. The Koyas of Kamaram are explicit in claiming it as a Koya festival, and the rituals associated with the *Jatara* (such as animal sacrifice, and the consumption of meat and alcohol) clearly differentiate it from a Hindu festival. However, these Hindu depictions of Sammakka and Sarakka are found

in almost every Koya household in Kamaram. According to Kaka, a Koya elder in Kamaram, these Hindu representations have only emerged in the past 10 years. Since many of the Koyas practice Hinduism as part of their religious beliefs, it is not surprising that these representations are now accepted in their homes.

The Sammakka Saralamma Jatara may present and celebrate Koya religious traditions, but those are clearly incorporated into and subject to wider pan-Hindu representations. Other members are less troubled by this mixing of traditions and may, in fact, embrace it. However, for some members of the community, such Hinduised representations of festivals and deities undermine the narrative of Koya identity that they have proactively sought to construct and maintain [see Chapter 2 on *Koitur*] through a range of stories, artifacts, festivities, and cultural practices. Rao and Ravikumar, in their discussion of a *Jatara* in Hyderabad, write ‘Religion, in particular the observance of village rituals, has not been free from the influence of politics, power struggles, or efforts to establish the hegemony of a particular caste’ (2017, 260). Likewise, the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara is not free from these contestations. While these representations are not state sponsored per se, they are part of the festival where the state—however heterogeneous—is seen as the foremost champion of these Hindu representations and their injection into Koya lifeworlds.

5.7 Rekkala Remakka Jatara: ‘A Full Koya’ *Jatara*

In March 2019, I was invited to attend the Rekkala Remakka Jatara at Markodu, a village located in rural Telangana. This Jatara is held in the year before the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara. Upon reaching Markodu, I was greeted by two burly, middle-aged men dressed in white *khadi* shirts and pants. Their attire reminded me of what politicians in India typically wear and, true enough, they introduced themselves as part of the organising committee for the *Jatara*.⁵⁹ After exchanging some pleasantries, one of the organisers, Raju, told me, ‘This is a full Koya *Jatara*. It is our *Jatara*’. (The emphasis placed on the words ‘full Koya’ is interesting, and I’ll discuss it in more detail shortly). When I walked into the main area of the *Jatara*, a volleyball tournament was in full swing and there were about 15 stalls selling food, drinks, and toys for children. As I was the only foreigner there, I soon attracted many stares and requests for selfies.

⁵⁹ Lisa N. Trivedi (2007) elaborates on the connection of *khadi* cloth with the *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency) movement, and why the cloth became so popular among Indian politicians.

After waiting for about two hours, I was asked to go to the river to witness the start of the *Jatara*. The festival celebrates the birth of the Komaram clan (which is also the clan of the Koya tribal hero Komaram Bheem). Thus, the ritual mimics a wedding ceremony; the ‘groom’ is represented by three tall bamboo stalks, and the ‘bride’ is represented by the flag of the Komaram clan and is revered as the clan goddess (see Figure 5.10). The first part of the ritual involves the Koya priest leading the ‘groom’ to the field. It was a curious ritual, as one would think that they would take a direct route from the river to the field. Yet, the Koya priest who was in a trance-like state, kept leading the entourage in random directions, and at times, he would run around in circles and whip the air with a rope that he carried (see Figure 5.11). I was impressed as he ran quite fast for a man his age. Some of us who were watching at the side also got whipped gently by him. Moreover, when it seemed that the entourage was making progress, he would push it back and lead it away in a random direction.



Figure 5.10: The Clan Goddess and Her Entourage



Figure 5.11: The ‘Groom’ Being Led by the Koya Priest (Dressed in White Shirt, with Bells around His Waist)

The whole sequence of events was accompanied by people hitting drums, and the entire atmosphere was quite intense. When I asked Raju why the priest was running around and hitting the air, he explained that the priest's role is to ward off the evil spirits in the area. Thus, he must guide it in a way that the 'groom' is not affected by these spirits. The meandering paths which the priest took was therefore meaningful and efficacious for ensuring the safety of the groom and successful completion of the ritual. Meanwhile, the 'bride's' entourage, led by a couple who are members of the Komaram clan, was on its way from the temple to the field. The climax was when both entourages met in the middle of the field. For lack of a better description, I would say that the 'groom' hugged the 'bride'.

Some of the women started to douse the flag and bamboo with water, and some of the men started to hit the bamboo with sticks gently. Others set off fireworks, beat drums and danced. I was curious about why they were 'hitting' the groom. I asked one of the organisers and he told me that this was done to ward off evil spirits during this sacred moment. After about half an hour, both 'bride' and 'groom' were doused with water. Both entourages then merged into one and proceeded to the temple. The main entourage was led by a married couple who were members of the Komaram clan (see Figure 5.12). The couple walked in a trance, and at certain moments, they would break into a dance. It was a feverish atmosphere as the Koyas gathered around and danced to the drumbeats. When the entourage reached the front of the temple, the 'groom' was placed in the temple first and the 'bride' was taken around the temple thrice (see Figure 5.13).



Figure 5.12: Couple Leading the Entourage



Figure 5.13: The Clan Goddess Circling outside the Temple, accompanied by drums

It was clear that emphasis was placed on the ‘bride’, rather than the ‘groom’. The rationale was that Koya women are revered for their life-giving powers and that the Komaram clan was born out of the womb. Once the ‘bride’ had circled the temple thrice, she was placed in the temple and people proceeded to give offerings. While these rituals were taking place, the Koyas in attendance broke into a dance and seemed to be having a wonderful time. Later that evening, the ‘bride’ was brought to the river and was bathed with river water by the women. On the way back to the temple, the ‘bride’ had to step through small bushels on dried grass that were set on fire. It seemed to be a purification ritual, and by that time, it was close to midnight. I could not stay up as I was exhausted from the travelling and the sensory overload. My friends shared with me the next day that families would bring chickens or goats to sacrifice and that women who wanted to bear children would arrive with offerings. The animal sacrifices and offerings reflect the dynamics which are often present in the ritual domain. For example, N.S. Rao and M.Ravikumar’s (2017) article on the Bonalu festival in Telangana, traced how the festival gained massive popularity as it evolved over the years, leading to a struggle for domination and recognition of status over who gets to organise the ritual. They write, ‘the ritual performance is the locus of conflicts and contestations because of the play of honour and the emergence of political, economic, and other forms of power’ (Rao and Ravikumar 2017, 245). In a similar fashion, the Jatara has become a locus of contestations, with competing interests, an opportunity for Koya assertion to portray it as a ‘full Koya’ festival. Together with the sacrifice of meat, there is a deliberate effort to preserve the Jatara as devoid of any Hindu or Brahmanical influence.

Another important event that took place during the *Jatara* was that Arjun gave a speech that evening. He had written a book on the *Jatara* and was selling it at ₹100. In his speech, he talked

about the importance of Koya identity and heritage. His oratory skills captured everyone's attention, and there were moments of applause during his speech (see Figure 5.14). It was not merely a speech to promote his book; rather, he talked about wider concerns and issues the Koyas faced. As I sat through the speech, I reflected about how *Jataras* like these serve as sites of practice – that of maintenance, and reproduction of Koya religious identity. Despite being the subject of negotiations and contestation, Koya *Jataras* remains vital to the cohesion and stability of Koya identity. These are not merely religious festivals, but rather, define what constitutes Koya identity.



Figure 5.14: Arjun Giving a Speech at the *Jatara*

5.8 Rekkala Remakka Jatara: A Site of Social Memory and Authentication

This brings me to the main argument that I intend to make in this section. I argue that the Rekkala Remakka Jatara is a site of social memory that presents an authentic representation of Koya religious identity. Like the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara, the Rekkala Remakka Jatara serves a site of social memory because it is a commemorative ceremony and involves bodily practices. It commemorates the birth of the Komaram clan. Given that Komaram Bheem, a revered Koya hero who fought for forest rights for tribal communities, is from that clan, the *Jatara* takes on greater significance for the Koyas who participate in it. Apart from remembering the birth of their clan, they also are reminded of the deeds of Komaram Bheem. Next, the procession and rituals involved in the Rekkala Remakka Jatara, albeit of a smaller scale than the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara, are forms of bodily practices in which the Koyas participate. Connerton writes ‘Our bodies, which in commemorations stylistically re-enact an image of the past, keep the past also in an entirely effective form in their continuing ability to perform certain skilled actions’ (Connerton 1989,72). For the Koyas, these ‘skilled actions’

include making the pilgrimage to Markodu once every two years for the Jatara, observing or participating in the rituals of the Jatara, such as dancing or walking in the entourage from the field to the temples, and presenting offerings to the clan goddess. All these actions are examples of ‘inscribing practices’. Thus, in line with Connerton’s assertion, the Rekkala Remakka Jatara is a generative site of social memory of the Koya community.

As mentioned before, I repeatedly heard the phrase ‘Full Koya’. The term ‘Full Koya’ as expressed by one of the organisers denotes how the Rekkala Remakka Jatara presents a different narrative on how this *Jatara* affects Koya religious identity. By ‘Full Koya’, the organiser referred to how the *Jatara* is devoid of non-Koya influence and is attended by Koyas only. The phrase ‘Full Koya’ articulate an aspiration that these *Jataras* serve as sites to authenticate and reify Koya religious identity. We should be cautious not to equate authenticity with notions of objectivity, originality and fixity. Anthropologists have long pointed out that authenticity is a culturally constructed and historically contingent notion that is used to define what is considered genuine (see Lindholm 2002, 336-337). In other words, authenticity is always mediated, and communities often have vested interest in creating representations of the authentic. For example, the idea of what constitutes ‘authentic’ food change over time as societies are always subject to new cultural influences. One can think of chicken rice in Singapore or a more politically contested food, falafel or hummus, who Israelis promote as their own to reinforce their own cultural or political dominance in the Middle East (Avieli 2018). Likewise, when I suggest that the *Jataras* serve as sites to authenticate Koya religious identity, I refer to Theodossopoulos, who states:

In many respects, authenticity encodes the expectation of truthful representation. It is concerned with the identity of persons and groups, the authorship of products, producers, and cultural practices, the categorical boundaries of society: ‘who’ or ‘what’ is ‘who’ what’ claims to be (2013, 339).

I suggest that the organisers, by characterising the Rekkala Remakka Jatara as a ‘Full Koya’, made a claim that this *Jatara* serves as an authentic representation of *Koya Punem*. Also, this *Jatara* presents Koya religious identity as it reminds the Koyas that they have their own creation myths, which do not have Hindu origins. As in the case of the Sammakka Sarlamma Jatara, the authenticity of this *Jatara* is buttressed by its links to a Koya hero, Komaram Bheem. Furthermore, all those involved in organising the *Jatara* were Koyas. For example, the organisers, the Koya priests and members of the entourage were all Koyas. Unlike for the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara, the presence of the state was minimal, with only a couple of

policemen standing around for crowd control. There were some reporters from the regional newspapers, but the media presence was nowhere near that for the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara. Of note, there was no Hindu depiction of the clan goddess of the Komaram clan.

As I compared both these *Jataras*, I could appreciate what the organiser meant by ‘Full Koya’. To clarify, it did not mean that the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara was inauthentic in any way. Rather, the Rekkala Remakka Jatara served as a representation of Koya religious identity that has not been appropriated by external influences, which underscored its authenticity. Stuart Hall writes:

It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we give them a meaning. In part, we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation which we bring to them. In part, we give things meaning by how we use them, or integrate them into our everyday practices (1996, 3).

The organisation of this *Jatara* with close adherence to Koya religious traditions and the characterisation of the *Jatara* as ‘Full Koya’ helps create a representation of what an authentic Koya religious identity should be. Although it is uncertain whether the Rekkala Remakka Jatara will be appropriated by external influences, such as Hinduism, it remains a site of social memory that represents what the Koyas regard as their authentic identity, in part achieved through embodied practices, myths and meanings. In the next section, I present another narrative of Koya religious identity at the village level, the Karukonda Sadalamma Panduga.

5.9 Karukonda Sadalamma Panduga: Reviving Koya Religious Identity

It was seven in the morning, and I was woken up by the crowing of a rooster. I reluctantly opened my weary eyes and saw Santhosh’s wife, Rachana, standing at my door with a broom in hand. I quickly got the hint that she wanted me to leave the room and went on my morning walk. When I returned to the house, I realised that she was about to give the house a thorough cleaning. She proceeded to sweep every nook and cranny and then filled up pails of water to mop the floors. As I helped her to fill the pails with water, I asked her whether it was a special occasion. She smiled and said, ‘A goddess is coming to visit today. We must prepare for her visit’. At this moment, Santhosh entered the courtyard, and I went over to clarify what Rachana meant by ‘A goddess is coming to visit today’. Santosh said:

It is a special day today. Our clan *Velupu* (goddess) ‘Karukonda Sadalamma’ is coming to our home. This *Velupu panduga* (clan goddess festival) is supposed to be done every year, but it has not been done for many years. This *panduga* belongs to my clan; today, I am reviving it.

On hearing that, I was quite excited as this would be the first time that I attended a Koya *panduga* in the village. That evening, one of the youths came to my room and told me to go to the *boddurai*.⁶⁰ About an hour later, an entourage of six Koya priests and two drummers entered the village. Two of the men were carrying a red flag hoisted on poles. The flags were adorned with ornaments and had various symbols on it. According to Santosh, the flags represented the goddess of his clan.

When the entourage reached the *boddurai*, two women walked up to the men and poured water on their feet. Santosh told me that this was the Koya way of welcoming the goddess into the village. When the entourage reached Santosh's home, the goddess was carried gently into its main hall and placed on a bed (see Figure 5.15). Some of the ladies of the village removed the ornaments and cleaned these gently with milk (see Figure 5.16). One of the ladies told me that they were 'giving the goddess a bath after a long journey'. The cleaned ornaments were placed in a basin next to the bed.



Figure 5.15: The Goddess Resting on a Bed



Figure 5.16: Ornaments Being Washed with Milk

After about an hour, the ornaments were put back on the flags and they were placed in the courtyard of Santosh's home. The Koya priests then stood in front of the flags and touched the poles twice with their shoulders, after which, they prostrated themselves in front of the flags (see Figure 5.17). Then, the men of the household, Santosh and Arjun, were asked to follow suit. While this was taking place, others were beating drums and occasionally blowing the *akkum*, a horn instrument used in Koya festivals. After prostrating on the ground, the Koya priests, as well as Santosh and Arjun, rolled to the left twice and to the right twice. Then, they

⁶⁰ A place of worship in the centre of Koya villages; important meetings and discussions pertaining to village matters are often held there.

stood up and touched the poles twice with their shoulders. The Koya priests took some incense and gently wafted the incense smoke into the flags. That marked the end of the ritual for the evening. Rachana then prepared a simple meal of rice and chicken curry to feed the entourage. After they had eaten, the Koya priests kept an all-night vigil in front of the flags.



Figure 5.17: Prostrating to the Goddess

The next day, at around eight in the morning, the drummers started to beat their drums and that marked the beginning of the ritual. The Koya priests carried the flags on their shoulders and turmeric powder was smeared on the ornaments. The priests then placed the flags on their hips and started to twirl around according to the beats of the drum. After twirling for a couple of rounds, the priests placed the flags back in the courtyard. Everyone was asked to leave the house and stand in the courtyard. A goat was brought in front of the Goddess and was fed some liquor. Then, the goat was gently guided into the house. Everyone started to gather around the windows to look at the goat as it stumbled into the house. A Koya priest stood behind the goat, and whenever it tried to get out of the house, gently pushed it back in. Meanwhile, the drums continued to beat as everyone looked on. I asked Santosh about the significance of letting the goat into the home. He said ‘We need to know whether the goddess is happy with our arrangement. The goat will go into the home and if it shivers, it tells us that the goddess is happy’.

True enough, after about 45 minutes, someone shouted that the goat had shivered. A Koya priest then brought it out into the courtyard to sacrifice the goat to the goddess (see Figure 5.18). He took out a sharp knife and slit its throat. Its blood was sprinkled on the *Dalu Gadda* and the goat’s head and two of its hooves were hacked off and placed in front of the *Dalu Gadda*. Then,

the other part was handed over to two Koya men who proceeded to butcher it into pieces. About an hour later, Rachana took the goat pieces and started to prepare a curry. What happened next took me by surprise. A villager brought out a small piglet and handed it to one of the Koya priests. The priest started to feed the piglet cooked rice while holding it down on the ground (see Figure 5.19). After the piglet had eaten four to five mouthfuls, he picked it up and ran around the perimeter of the house. The other priests followed him, and after running thrice around the house, the priest who carried the piglet took out a knife and hacked its head off.



Figure 5.18: Goat sacrifice in front of Goddess



Figure 5.19: Pig Sacrifice before House

A small hole was dug in front of the house and the head of the piglet was buried in the hole. That marked the end of the ritual. Then, Rachana brought out rice and goat curry for everyone. It was an overwhelming experience for me as I held the plate of rice and goat curry in my hand. Santosh walked over to me with a huge grin on his face and asked, ‘How did you find this ritual?’ I did not know what to say for I was still trying to process the events that had taken place in the space of 3 hours. I simply replied:

Santosh, I can understand why the goat was sacrificed as this was also done during the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara. I’ve never seen this ritual of carrying a piglet and running around the home. Can you tell me why this is done?

Santosh smiled and said, ‘Oh, we do this to chase away any bad spirits in the house and to protect the members inside. Also, you will have pork curry tonight for dinner’. After lunch, the Koya priests proceeded to exit the village with the entourage that had accompanied them. I quickly finished my lunch and watched the entourage leave the village. Then, I sat in my room to gather my thoughts about all the events from the previous night onwards.

What struck me was Santosh's initial comments that this festival had not been celebrated in the village for a long time and that he was going to revive it. As mentioned earlier, the *Panduga* refers to a festival, albeit on a smaller scale than the two *Jataras* described in this chapter. Despite its smaller scale, I suggest that similarly to the *Jataras*, the *Panduga* also serves as a key site of social memory for the Koyas. As Santhosh mentioned, the *Panduga* is a clan god festival. Participants who celebrate this festival are reminded of their kinship ties and clan membership. This is achieved through ritual procession, priestly managed sacrifice and communal eating. It is important to note here that Santosh was not reviving the *Panduga* for all the Koyas of Telangana. In my conversations with him, he mentioned that this *panduga* has been celebrated in other Koya villages, but not in Kamaram for a long time. When I asked why, he stated that over the years, many of the Koyas in Kamaram were affected by 'outside culture' and had 'forgotten' their 'Koya festivals'. This is, of course, a contested narrative, as Santhosh might have a vested interest in reviving the *Panduga*. This is because, by reviving this *Panduga* in Kamaram, Santosh raised his reputation in the village, as a passionate advocate for the preservation of Koya culture and devout worshipper of *Koya Punem*.

Regardless of Santhosh's intentions, I see the revival of this *Panduga* in the village as Santhosh's articulation of his religious identity and of his creation of a broader narrative of what Koya religious identity should be and can be achieved through these religious rituals. Furthermore, the vivid spectacle of the animal sacrifices emphasises how Koya religious identity is not restricted to 'Hindu' or Brahminical renderings. Rather, it is a rebuttal of the notion that tribal communities have 'lost' their sense of identity and are assimilated as 'Hindus'. In fact, some might call it an affront to Hindu religions, given its blatant animal sacrifice and alcohol consumptions (as discussed earlier) Hence, this *Panduga* shows how Koya religious identity is a complex narrative and cannot be simply reduced to a singular interpretation. In the next section, I elaborate on this narrative of religious identity, as one that is constantly in flux and is a form of 'mixing' and 'matching'.

5.10 Mixing and Matching: Hinduism and Koya Religious Identity

As I have shown, Hinduism looms large in Koya religious identity, as seen in how the festivals are co-opted by the state. The opening vignette highlights the pervasive influence of Hinduism on tribal communities in India. In Kamaram, this is expressed in terms of how the Koyas celebrate Hindu festivals such as Diwali, Ram Navami and Maha Shivratri. This practice, coupled with the practice of vegetarianism and fasting during these festivals, indicates how

Hinduism has deeply permeated the religious identity of the Koyas in Kamaram. Given the increased contact between tribal communities and the larger Indian society over the years, this has been a common phenomenon which has led to tribal communities transforming their way of life, including religious practices, according to the Hindu worldview (Makal et al. 2018). In analysing this transformation, prominent Indian scholars have characterised it as ‘the Hindu method of tribal absorption’ (Bose, 1941), ‘Sanskritisation’ (Srinivas, 1966) or ‘Hinduisation’ (Gautam, 2016). All these terms largely point to tribal communities adopting Hindu practices, such as teetotalism, vegetarianism and the worship of Hindu gods. Over time, these practices have become part of their everyday religiosity and, according to these scholars, have augmented their sense of identity.

However, Xaxa (1999, 1522) raises an important question, ‘After adopting certain Hindu beliefs and practices, do tribes identify themselves as tribes or as castes?’ For the Koyas of Kamaram, the answer is that they continue to identify themselves as a tribe. Despite adopting Hindu beliefs and practices, they do not identify with caste or see themselves as a part of a caste-based society. Thus, a better heuristic is needed to make sense of Koya religious identity, without reducing it to assimilation or Hinduisation. This might be, in part, because having certain narratives of tribal identity can bring with it certain benefits, for example, in terms of administrative interests. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Koyas hold on to being defined as ‘Scheduled Tribes’ for the legal rights that they are given. At another level, it can also speak to a more narrativised form of identity construction, which Sinha (2009) describes as ‘mixing and matching’.

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, I refer to Sinha’s (2009) concept of ‘mixing and matching’ to understand how the Koyas of Kamaram express their religious identity. According to Sinha, ‘mixing and matching’ signifies ‘a process of picking, choosing and enacting a style of religiosity preferred by a practitioner ... This “mixing and matching” of elements produces a scenario where diverse (and sometimes contradictory) components of ritual behaviour and thinking co-exist without trauma’ (2009, 97). I find this concept resonant in my analysis of Koya religious identity. At first, I was convinced that the Koyas are ‘Hindus’. However, I soon realised that this assumption was problematic as the Koyas did not discard their *Koya Punem* and nor did they view their *Koya Punem* as ‘Hindu’. The Koyas draw clear distinctions between the two sets of religious practices and celebrate their Jataras and Pandugas as well as Hindu festivals. Thus, Sinha's (2009) concept of ‘mixing and matching’ seems to best captures how the Koyas are creating their narrative of Koya religious identity, drawing on these two ‘traditions’ to advance their own interests.

Margaret Somers, who works on the narrative construction of identity i draw on throughout the thesis, reminds us ‘People act, or do not act, in part according to how they understand their place in any number of given narratives – however fragmented, contradictory, or partial’ (1994, 618) Likewise, the Koyas, as regards their religious identity, are engaged in mixing and matching both *Koya Punem* and Hinduism to constitute a narrative of their religious identity. For some, the two ‘traditions’ might appear as contradictory – as in meat versus vegetarian – and yet for the Koyas, such apparent contradictions are reconciled through their practices in ritual and everyday life. For example, the Koyas eating vegetarian food during Hindu festivals and eating non-vegetarian food during *Koya Jataras*.

However, recent developments have led to the possibility of a rethinking of Koya religious identity. On 15 March 2021, representatives from tribal communities in central India organised a protest at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, to demand a separate tribal classification in the religion section of the 2021 national census. This demand for a ‘tribal’ category in the religion section stems from how tribal communities have, without their consent, been categorised as Hindu in the national census since India’s independence. This has ramifications in terms of expressing Koya religious identity, especially when *Koya Punem* is not recognised officially. For instance, a Koya youth, Vinay, who discussed this issue of religion with me, said, ‘Brother, actually, I am Hindu because in my application form, there is no option for tribal religion. We are categorised as Hindu. If there is the option of *Koya Punem*, or tribal religion, I would definitely put that option’. This reflects how the state is seeking to impose majoritarian categories, such as subsuming tribal religion under Hinduism. It artificially inflates the number of Hindus in the census and underscores the problematic assumption that tribal religion is equivalent to Hinduism. Also, it aligns with the Hindu majoritarian ideology of the current political party in power, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and its goal to make India into a ‘Hindu Rashtra’ (Hindu Nation). I will explore this in greater detail in the next chapter, but for now, it is evident that an official recognition of tribal identity can possibly augment the narrative of religious identity among the Koyas.

5.11 Conclusion

On 15 August 2019, the village youths celebrated *Raksha Bandan* in Kamaram, which coincide with India’s Independence Day. *Raksha Bandan* is a Hindu festival that celebrates the brother–sister relationship between men and women who may or may not be biologically related. On this day, a sister ties a *rakhi*, or thread, around the wrist of her brother to pray for his prosperity,

health and wellbeing. The brother offers a gift or sweet in return and promises to protect his sister. As I watched Arjun giving out sweets to the Koya youths and receiving the ‘*rakhis*’, I asked, ‘Brother, *Raksha Bandhan* is Hindu festival. Why are the Koya youths celebrating it?’ He replied, ‘Brother, the Koya youths are too used to celebrating this festival. Change takes time’. Arjun’s short reply reflected the fluidity and capaciousness of Koya religious identity. The Koya *Jataras* and *Pandugas* are important sites of articulating religious identity for the Koyas. These are sites of social memory, authentication, and revival. Yet, as seen in the example of the Sammakka Sarakka Jatara, these *Jataras* and *Pandugas* are open to contestation and appropriation. Concurrently, the Koyas participate in Hindu rituals and festivals owing to Hinduism’s pervasive influence in the region. Yet, they do draw a clear distinction between *Koya Punem* and Hinduism. Hence, it is what I described as a form of mixing and matching that constitutes this narrative of Koya religious identity. It is fluid and is constantly being negotiated, appropriated and contested. In the next chapter of this thesis, I explore how the Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad, a tribal welfare organisation, leverages on this fluidity of Koya religious identity to propagate *Hindutva*, an ethno-nationalist ideology, among the Koyas.

Chapter 6: *Vanavasi*—the Saffronising of Koya Identity

6.1 Opening Vignette

In 2013, during the fieldwork phase for my Masters program in University of Hyderabad, I was informed by a Koya that a tribal welfare organisation, the Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad (VKP), had bought a small house in Tadvai and transformed it into a hostel. This marked the first welfare project by the VKP in the area. As I was curious about the VKP's work amongst the Koyas in Telangana, I continued to track the VKP's activities and structured one of my initial research aims around the organisation. When I arrived in Hyderabad in September 2018 to commence fieldwork for this thesis, I decided to visit the VKP '*karyalay*', a meeting place for the volunteers of the VKP (Andersen and Damle 2019, 66). The '*karyalay*' was housed in a small apartment, and when I reached its front entrance, I was greeted by Thiru, a young man in his early 20s. I explained that I was a researcher and wanted to know more about the VKP. Upon hearing that, Thiru gave me a wary look and invited me in. He told me to wait in the living room while he made a phone call. While waiting for Thiru, I saw pictures of the Hindu deity Lord Ram, Bharat Mata and the founder of the VKP, Balasaheb Deshpande, adorning the walls of the '*karyalay*'. There were also various brochures on VKP's programs were scattered on Thiru's table.

Soon after, Thiru ended the call and told me that it was preferable that I visit during the weekends to meet Mr Raj, a senior member and '*Pracharak*' (full-time worker) of the VKP. Not wanting to waste a trip, I tried to start a conversation with Thiru. Although he was reluctant to talk at first, he eventually shared that he was from the Lambada community and that his parents had sent him when he was about 10 years old to a VKP hostel near his village. The VKP had sponsored his studies, and he had recently graduated with a degree in commerce. Upon graduating, he decided to be a '*swayamsevak*' (volunteer) in the VKP and was made the administrator of the VKP headquarters in Telangana. Before I left, Thiru gave me a brief tour of the apartment; then, he handed me a brochure and said in a gruff tone, 'All you need to know about the VKP is in this brochure. I am busy now, so you please come on the weekend'. Not wanting to overstay my welcome, I took the brochure and thanked Thiru for his time.

When I opened the brochure, the first thing that caught my attention was the phrase ‘Vanavasi, Gramavasi, Nagaravasi, We are all Bharatvasi’ printed in bold on the cover. This phrase translates to ‘Forest People, Village people, City people, We are all people of India’. On the second page of the brochure, the words ‘Who are the Vanavasis’ and ‘Reach the Unreached Vanavasis’ were prominently featured. The contents of the brochure were mostly about the various welfare programs of the VKP. To me, it seemed like the VKP was just another tribal welfare organisation and that ‘*Vanavasi*’ was just another term used to describe tribal communities in India.

A few weeks later, I arrived at the village and commenced my fieldwork in Kamaram. I remembered that the hostel was still in Tadvai and decided to visit with Krishna, one of the Koyas from Kamaram. When we reached the hostel, I was stunned to see that it was no longer the small house that I had visited during the fieldwork for my master’s in 2013. The VKP hostel was now a two-storey building with a large courtyard; it was fully electrified and had a big kitchen—a far cry from what it was in 2013 (see Figure 6.1).



Figure 6.1: VKP Hostel at Tadvai

When we reached the courtyard, Krishna introduced me to the warden. The warden proceeded to ask me about my research, and I replied, ‘I am interested in learning about VKP’s work amongst the Koyas and the *Adivasis* in Telangana’. He immediately interjected in a stern tone, ‘The Koyas are not *Adivasis*. They are *Vanavasis*’. I quickly professed my ignorance to defuse the tension. When I returned to the village, Krishna asked me about my visit to the VKP hostel. I told him that I would love to visit more often and learn more about the activities there. Krishna

smiled at me and said, ‘Yes, you should visit, The VKP are doing good here and helping the *Vanavasis*’.

6.2 Introduction

As I reflected on my visit to the VKP headquarters and the VKP hostel in Tadvai, I pondered over a series of questions. Why is there an insistence on using the term ‘*Vanavasi*’ to identify the Koyas? How do we understand this intertwining of welfare and the assertion that the Koyas are ‘*Vanavasis*’? What do the VKP mean by ‘doing good’? What is the impact of VKP’s work on the Koyas and other Indigenous communities in India? Through unpacking these questions and delving into the work of the VKP, I argue the following points in this chapter. First, the term ‘*Vanavasi*’ represents a narrative of Koya identity that is underpinned by *Hindutva*: a form of Hindu ethno-nationalist ideology. Since its inception by V. D. Savarkar in 1928, *Hindutva* is often likened to ‘ethno-nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and fascism’ (Reddy 2011, 439). According to studies that have sought to trace the *Hindutva* ideology across time, its chief aims are to transform Hindu culture into an undifferentiated whole (Froerer 2007a, 1033) and to forge India into ‘one nation, one people, one culture’ (Khilnani 1997, 151). That is, to form a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu Nation). In this sense, *Hindutva* equates religious and national identity, where every Indian is defined as a Hindu, and the Hindu faith is defined as the core of Indian nationhood (Froerer 2007b; Gopal 1991; McKean 1996; Reddy 2011, 439; van der Veer 1994). Hence, defining the Koyas as ‘*Vanavasis*’ serves to assimilate outlier groups, such as the ‘tribals’, into the *Hindu Rashtra*.

Secondly, I suggest that the VKP goes beyond being a welfare organisation. Rather, it should be viewed as far more capacious and utilitarian in nature, where welfare projects by the VKP serve as conduits to propagate the *Hindutva* ideology among the Koyas and other tribal communities in India. Here, I employ the term ‘saffronising’ to describe this process. The colour saffron symbolises strength and bravery in Hinduism. Just as Hindu priests and holy men wear saffron robes, Hindu nationalists also wear this colour to signify their convictions. The saffron flag or ‘*bhagwa dhvaj*’ is regarded by Hindu nationalists as the true national flag, rather than the official tricolour flag (Basu 1993, 39). The term ‘saffronising’ is a political neologism that ‘essentially refers to linguistic and semiotic actions of right-wing nationalists in enforcing a reversion to the ancient Hindu way of life’ (Bhatia 2020, 572). Likewise, I use this term in this ethnographic context to illustrate how the VKP is ‘saffronising’ Koya identity and, in so doing, propagating its own narrative on Indigenous identity in India. Finally, I probe the

link between *Hindutva* and the notion of development or '*vikas*', across the work of the VKP. VKP's project of integration is mediated through the notion and practice of development and facilitates the redefining of Koya identity as '*Vanavasi*'. As a corollary, I show that ethno-nationalist ideologies can manifest in non-coercive entities and programs, such as educational and development-based institutions. This in turn allows greater propagation among, and acceptance by, the Indigenous communities in India.

To develop my argument, I have structured the chapter into the following sections. I begin with a discussion of *Hindutva* organisations in India and then present an overview of the VKP. This is followed by an examination of how the VKP constructs its own narrative of Koya identity through the term '*Vanavasi*'. Next, I illustrate how the VKP 'saffronises' Koya identity through an analysis of the VKP manual, the activities in the hostel and its welfare projects. I then move on to focus on the VKP volunteers and how they describe their work in the VKP as '*seva*', meaning 'selfless service'. Here, I observe how these volunteers view their '*seva*' as a form of ethical practice that reinforces the VKP's narrative of Koya identity. Finally, I maintain that the VKP adheres to what E. Anderson and Longkumer term as 'neo-Hindutva', where *Hindutva* ideology has evolved into 'increasing mainstream and normalized (but also obfuscated) forms of rhetoric and mobilization' (2018, 374). The 'neeness' of *Hindutva* is seen in how the ideology of *Hindutva* takes on diverse and vernacular forms in contemporary times, attaching itself to a complex milieu of Indian society. For example, Saumya Saxena's (2018) research on the adjudication of the Indian courts in *Hindutva* cases and the 1995 Supreme Court ruling that recognised *Hindutva* as a way of life shows that these have paved the way for *Hindutva* to be equated as 'Indianisation' or 'Indian Culture'. Arkotong Longkumer's work on Patanjali products in Nagaland reveals how *Hindutva* ideology is propagated through the discourse of food products, health and yoga in Nagaland (Longkumer 2018). Drawing from these examples, I argue that the VKP's work amongst the Koyas represents a form of 'neo-Hindutva' where Koya identity is saffronised through infusing *Hindutva* ideology with idealised notions of development and progress.

6.3 *Hindutva* Organisations in India

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which means 'National Volunteer Organisation', was founded in 1925 by K. B. Hedgewar, and has served at the forefront of propagating *Hindutva* in India. According to its manifesto, its explicit aim is to 'carry the nation to the pinnacle of glory, through organising the entire society and ensuring protection of Hindu

Dharma' (RSS 2012). Today, it has expanded into every state in India through its *shakha* (cell) network and formed various wings (economic, political, women and tribal) and affiliated organisations, collectively known as the *Sangh Parivar* (Family of the Sangh). During the 1980s and 1990s, the work of the *Sangh Parivar* culminated in the 'saffron wave' (Hansen 1999) where Hindu nationalists and their organisations sought to transform 'Indian public culture into a sovereign, disciplined national culture rooted in what is claimed to be a superior ancient Hindu past, and to impose a corporatist and disciplined social and political organisation upon society' (Hansen 1999, 4). It is important to note that this 'saffron wave' was by no means a peaceful endeavour. The term 'saffron terror' is also used as a neologism to describe acts of violence caused by hardline adherents of *Hindutva* ideology (Iqbal 2019, 48–9). Examples include attacks against Dalit, Muslim and Christian communities, mob lynching, communal violence and cow vigilantism.⁶¹

Despite the atrocities committed by the members of the *Sangh Parivar*, it has not dampened the progressive embedding of *Hindutva* in India. Rather, the RSS has facilitated the embedding of *Hindutva* in India by situating itself as an 'elaborate institutional edifice in civil society and by operating a "dual identity", either with a highly visible, political profile or through voluntary, grassroots services' (Kamat and Mathew 2003, 11). The political profile is manifested through the close relationship between the RSS and the BJP, and the extensive work done by the *Sangh Parivar* among various groups in India's society. On the political front, the RSS has close ideological links with the BJP and that has brought *Hindutva* into the forefront of Indian politics (Ali Saleem 2021; Narayan 2021). With the help of the RSS, the BJP has secured electoral victories in 2014 and 2019. For example, RSS volunteers were mobilised to visit villages under the 'NaMo Rath' initiative in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh in order to advocate for the BJP (*The Indian Express* 2014).⁶² Narendra Modi's strong affiliation with the RSS is well known, as is his role as an RSS worker, or *pracharak*, during the early phases of his career, which decades later culminated in him becoming the Prime Minister of India. This is a common path of several ministers in Modi's cabinet, who are openly affiliated with the RSS.⁶³ Meetings, or '*Samanvay Baithaks*', are regularly held between RSS and BJP leaders

⁶¹ See Christoph Jaffrelot's *The Sangh Parivar: A Reader* (2005), Achin Vanaik's *The Rise of Hindu Authoritarianism* (2017) and Tanika Sarkar's *Hindu Nationalism in India* (2021) for an overview of the *Sangh Parivar* and its links to communal violence in India.

⁶² I refer to a fleet of minitrucks decorated with photos of 'NaMo' (Narendra Modi). These minitrucks broadcast pre-recorded speeches of Modi at villages and sold 'NaMo' merchandise. Also, the term "Namo" is part of a salutation 'Namo Namaha', meaning 'I bow to you'. When deployed in this context, it serves an expression of fervent support for Narendra Modi and by extension, the BJP.

⁶³ According to a report by the *Hindustan Times* (2016), six out of 19 ministers in the expanded Union Council of Ministers are linked to the RSS.

(Daily News Analysis 2015), and the close relationship between the RSS and the BJP has helped to legitimise and solidify the spread of *Hindutva* in India.

However, India is home to a vast diversity of social milieus and ideological sensibilities, some of which go against the exclusive idea of a *Hindu Rashtra*. To counter this, Sangh Parivar organisations have expanded their efforts to create a cultural hegemony that integrates and assimilates various groups into the *Hindutva* worldview (Narayan 2021, 3; Sud 2007, 132). This cultural hegemony involves creating a notion of *Hindutva* that appeals to the diverse sections of Indian society. As Sangh Parivar organisations are autonomous from the RSS, they can project themselves as social, cultural or welfare organisations and garner ‘support from many different – even antagonistic – quarters of society’ (Jaffrelot 2005, 16). Concurrently, these organisations are often helmed by ex-members of the RSS. This ensures that these organisations extend the work of the RSS by penetrating society at the grassroots level and pave the way towards the establishment of a *Hindu Rashtra* in India (Jaffrelot 2005, 10). The Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad (VKP), as I illustrate in the following sections, is one such *Sangh Parivar* organisation, which is responsible for assimilating the tribal communities into the *Hindutva* worldview.⁶⁴

6.4 Overview of the Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad

The VKP was established in 1952 by Ramkant Keshav Deshpande, at Jashpur, Chhattisgarh. Ramakant Keshav Deshpande was born on 26 December 1913 in Maharashtra to a Marathi Brahmin family. On one of his visits to Nagpur, he was introduced to Dr Hedgewar, founder of the RSS, and became a *swyamsevak* (RSS volunteer). After obtaining a law degree, he started practising law in Ramtek and became the *karyavah* or leader of the Ramtek Sangh. It was also in Ramtek that he met M.S.S Golwalkar, a prominent RSS leader, who inspired him to work towards tribal welfare. In 1950, he was posted to Jashpur as Director of the Tribal Welfare Department, and two years later, he resigned from his post and founded the first VKP hostel in Jashpur. Of note, Jashpur has one of the oldest and largest Catholic communities in central India, a result of the mass evangelism of the tribal communities by missionaries during the colonial period. Establishing the VKP there was a clear signal that the VKP is geared towards countering Christian missionary activity. The following is an excerpt from his biography, in which he has stated:

⁶⁴ The VKP is also known as the Akhil Bharatiya Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram.

Today there is a concerted effort to separate the Vanavasi samaj from the Hindu samaj and make them think they are not Hindus. Our effort is to awaken the vanvasi regions and remove this feeling of difference. For this we have to unite the Vanavasis. That is the Akhil Bharatiya Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram's work. That is its major role... We want the kind of Vanavasi leadership which can bring Hindu unity. We need to erect a society which is proud of Hindutva (Deshpande 1990, 17).

From its early formation and the excerpt above, it can be observed that the ethos of the VKP is firmly embedded in assimilating tribal communities into the *Hindutva* worldview. This is reflected in VKP's moto, '*Tu Main Ek Rakta*', which means 'We are one blood'. This idea of 'one blood' resonates with the writings of Sarvakar who, as mentioned earlier, defined the three essentials of Hindutva as a common nation (*rashtra*), a common race (*jati*) and a common culture/civilisation (*sanskriti*). The motto reflects the role of the VKP in integrating tribal communities by making them one with the Hindus.

In the VKP (Maharashtra) website, www.vanvasi.org, it states:

The main objective of VKP is to eliminate the chasm between the Hindu community and their Vanavasi brethren with affection and good faith. VKP is working on several fronts which will help in furthering the development of Vanavasis and in assimilating into the mainstream of the urban society.

To eliminate this supposed 'chasm' and propagate the idea that tribal communities are of 'one blood' with the Hindu community, the VKP carries out extensive welfare projects and events among the tribal communities. Its welfare projects are operationalised under five main areas, namely Education, Health, Economic Development, Sports and Cultural Development. Under the aegis of these areas, the VKP has built residential schools, hostels, libraries, health centres, developing sports facilities and centres and providing agricultural education for farmers. Since its inception in 1952, the VKP has grown in strength, and today, it is a pan-India organisation that has reached over 50,000 villages. The VKP branch in Telangana was established in 1998 and has built six hostels and 225 *Vanavasi Vidya Kendras* (single teacher schools) throughout the state. Apart from giving free education, the VKP has provided free medical services in rural areas of Warangal, a district in Telangana with a sizeable population of tribal communities. In the 2016 Samakka Sarakka Jatara, VKP conducted a medical camp at which about 40 doctors volunteered to provide free medical assistance for the devotees attending the *Jatara*. Through these welfare projects and outreach activities, the VKP has established its presence in Telangana and promoted *Hindutva* to the tribal communities. It has offered a grassroots replacement to a chronic absence of state resources. In providing such critical institutions, VKP

is seen favourably and even essential by many marginalised groups, with little access to resources.

Several scholars have made similar observations. Sociologist Sarbeswar Sahoo, in his analysis of the VKP in Rajasthan, argues that ‘its developmental programmes have served as agencies of political socialization of the tribal population into Hindutva ideology’ (Sahoo 2013,120). The political scientist and media commentator, Nalin Mehta describes how the BJP and Narendra Modi have sought to create their version of ‘*Ram Rajya*’ by appealing to people on the margins, such as the ‘*vanars* and *Vanavasis*’, the poor and the women’ (2022, 549).⁶⁵ Through its welfare and developmental programs, the VKP has managed to appeal to the tribal communities in India while propagating its Hindutva ideology. This intertwining of welfare and ideology is underpinned by a firm insistence by the VKP that the tribal communities, such as the Koyas, are ‘*Vanavasis*’. Hence, it is by investigating this narrative that ‘the Koyas are *Vanavasis*’ that we can fully appreciate the extent of the VKP’s role in assimilating the Koyas into the *Hindutva* worldview.

6.5 ‘*Vanavasi, Gramavasi, Nagaravasi, We Are All Bharatvasi*’

To unpack the narrative of ‘Koyas are *Vanavasis*’, I first refer to a couple of excerpts taken from the VKP brochure (printed in English) and discuss the meaning of ‘*Vanavasi*’.

A segment of our society has been called Adivasi, backward, aborigines, heathens and pagans. These derogatory terms are dishonest and misused. In keeping with their inseparable continuity of cultural existence with the rest of the country, it’s more appropriate to call them Vanavasis.

During British rule, the then colonial administration tried to wean away the Vanavasi section of Indian population from the national mainstream as a part of its ‘divide and rule’ policy. Among the missionaries, some individuals donned the grab of researchers and produced misleading theories about the separate ethno-cultural identity of Vanavasis. Other Missionaries made use of spurious research and tried to convert the unsuspecting Vanavasis to Christianity.

These excerpts clearly illustrate the conviction with which claims are made regarding the purposely misleading usage of ethnonyms such as ‘*Adivasi*’ and ‘aborigines’. According to the VKP, tribal communities have fallen prey to the ‘divide and rule’ policy of colonial administrators and the proselytising efforts of Christian missionaries. The VKP argues that the

⁶⁵ The term *Ram Rajya* was brought into political discourse by Mahatma Gandhi. He used it to describe an utopian post-independence India where ‘citizens would be self-governing according to the highest principles of moral and political life’ (Lal 2008, 58). In the *Ramayana*, the *vanars* are depicted as powerful semi-divine beings who assisted Lord Ram in his search for Sita and the subsequent battle against Ravana.

use of *Adivasi* and ‘aborigines’ is ‘misguided’ as they are colonial missionary products seen as contributing to the breaking up of India by design (Sundar 2016, 153). As a replacement, the VKP proposes the term ‘*Vanavasi*’, which means ‘forest people’. It may seem anachronistic to depict tribals as ‘forest people’. However, the VKP uses this terminology to reflect their adherence to the *Hindutva* worldview, whereby tribals are seen as an integral part of the *Hindu Rashtra*. Froerer (2007b, 33) writes:

The term *Vanavasi* allows the RSS to propagate the view that the Aryans, not adivasis, were the original inhabitants of India and that, far from being ‘outside the Hindu fold’, the forest dwellers have traditionally held an honoured place within Hindu society.⁶⁶

Hence, the use of this term aligns perfectly with RSS’s goal of creating a ‘*Hindu Rashtra*’ in India, where ‘to be fully Indian and Indigenous is to be Hindu’ (Baviskar 2005, 5107).

This narrative also allows for the ideological justifications for the VKP to engage in ‘reconversion among Christian tribals and Hinduisation of non-Christian tribals’ (Vandavelde 2011, 45). Two more excerpts from the brochure illustrate further how tribal communities are imagined by the VKP:

A Vanavasi may be less educated and unhealthy. He is a combination of: Simple exterior and pleasant interior. Outward indifference and inner devotion. Lack of exposure and latent talents. In a nutshell he is a hidden mine.

Ameliorating the backwardness of tribal area of our country is the need of the hour. To create economic, health, educational and other civil opportunities for the Vanavasis and enable them to catchup with the more fortunate countrymen of Bharat, a Nationalistic tribal welfare organisation called Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram was established in 1952 at Jashpurnagar of Chhattisgarh state.

In describing the tribals as ‘less educated and unhealthy’ and that tribal areas in India are ‘backwards’, it justifies the paternalistic interventions by the VKP in the lives of tribal communities. Furthermore, its welfare projects portray the VKP in a positive light and justify its efforts to assimilate the tribal communities into the *Hindutva* worldview. Thus, the term *Vanavasi*, similar to the other ethnonyms deployed in this thesis (see chapter 3 on *Adivasi*), is anchored in a narrative of linear progress. It is wielded by the VKP seeking to articulate tribal identity in India as one that requires the VKP’s help to reach its full potential and liberate itself

⁶⁶ MSS Golwalkar, a prominent RSS leader and *Hindutva* ideologue, propagated the idea that the Indus Valley civilisation was part of the Aryan-Vedic civilisation (Golwalkar 1938). This was taken up by *Hindutva* proponents who sought to portray India as the land of the Aryans. However, recent evidence points to the genetic pool and the languages and cultures in India was a result of migrants blending with pre-existing indigenous populations over time. For more on the Aryan debate, see Edwin Bryant’s ‘*The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate*’ (2001), Thomas R. Trautmann’s ‘*The Aryan Debate*’ (2005), and Subrata Chattopadhyay Banerjee’s ‘*The Development of Aryan Invasion Theory in India: A Critique of Nineteenth-Century Social Constructionism*’ (2019).

from its backwardness. Ironically, such views were also propagated during colonial rule, as the British argued that their mission was to civilise the natives. In this more recent context, casting tribal communities as ‘*Vanavasi*’ aims to depict them as part of Hindu society since time immemorial, and to suggest that it was owing to their separation by foreign powers (colonial rulers and Christian missionaries) that these communities remained exploited and ‘backward’. This, in turn, provides the impetus for the VKP to reach, reclaim and reconvert the tribal communities back into their rightful place.

6.6 The VKP in Telangana: Saffronising the Koyas

Having shown how ‘*Vanavasi*’ serves as the *Hindutva* narrative of tribal identity in India, I now examine how it translates into a process of ‘saffronisation’ amongst the Koyas of Telangana in three ways. First, I draw on the VKP manual and show the way *Hindutva* operates as a pedagogical device. I then describe how this pedagogy is manifest in the VKP hostel and its role in cultivating the Koya youths to be ‘*Vanavasis*’. Finally, I discuss a public event organised by the VKP. I suggest that these events are a form of public outreach and a means for the VKP to promote the *Hindutva* ideology into the everyday lives of the Koyas.

6.6.1 VKP Manual as *Hindutva* Pedagogy

On one of my visits to the VKP hostel near Kamaram in January 2019, the warden invited me to his office for a chat. When we sat down and sipped hot cups of *chai*, he took out a book and started flipping through it. I was curious and asked why he was flipping through the book. He told me that the book was a manual for the VKP hostels in Telangana. I asked if he could give me a copy and he readily agreed. The manual, published mainly in Telugu, contains details such as the hostel rules and regulations, a daily routine, yoga exercises, and snippets of general knowledge. It also contained slogans, Hindu prayers and mantras which were published in Hindi. I present some excerpts from the manual here, which were translated by Sravanthi.⁶⁷

Slogans:

Bharat mata ki jai, khoonbhi dhenge (We give our blood) – *jaan bhi dhenge* (We give our lives) – *desh ki mitti khabhi na dhenge* (We will not give the soil of the country) – *Shivaji veer hai* – *Maharana Pratap veer hai, Jhansi Rani biddalam* (Brave Shivaji, Brave Maharana

⁶⁷ Sravanthi is a native Telugu speaker and my former classmate in Hyderabad Central University.

Pratap, We are the children of Rani Jhansi) – *Bhagat Singh thammullam* (We are Bhagat Singh's younger brothers)⁶⁸

Important quotations:

Uttaramyath samudrasya himaadreshchaiva dakshinam! Varshamthat bharatham naama bharathiyatra santhathihi!!

Translation: To the north of Hindu ocean, to the south of Himalayas, we have a great nation called *Bharatvarsh*.

The excerpts reflect the Hindu nationalistic sentiments that the Koya youths are exposed to everyday. These nationalistic sentiments align with *Hindutva* as the establishment of a ‘*Hindu Rashtra*’ requires a ‘superimposition of a religion, a culture, language, and a sacred territory’ (Jaffrelot 2007, 15). Thus, the teaching of these slogans and quotations expose the Koya youths to *Hindutva* values—chief among them sacrifice—and an imagined community led by national heroes. Once these lofty ideals are established, more concrete practices are outlined, supported by pan-Hindu scriptures and ideals:

Rules:

Greetings for Adults, *Namaste Acharyaji*, *Namaste Guruji*, *Namaste brother*, *Namaste sister*, are habits to be cultivated. English traditions must be abolished. After waking up from sleep, one must salute earth and bow down to parents for blessings. Take a bath in the morning at home. We must make a habit of praying. Make a habit of chanting *mantra* before a meal.

Characteristics of an ideal home:

The sign of ॐ (*Om*) must be present in the house. The portraits of Gods and important people must be placed in the house. One must learn how to respect guests and celebrate birthdays and festivals according to Hindu traditions. One must read *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavad Gita* at home. Control one’s usage of mobile phones and television. Use local goods and refrain from using foreign goods. Everyone in the family must maintain a distance from smoking, drinking and from playing cards.

Meditation *slokas*:

Shuklaam bharadharam vishnum shashivarnam chaturbhujam Prasanna vadhanam dhyayet sarvavignopa shanthaye!!

Meaning: Wearing white clothes, having a white appearance like the moon, the figure of Vishnu with the body, please remove all my obstacles.

Gurur brahma gurur Vishnu gurur devo maheshwara! Gurur saakshaath parabramha thasmaisri sri gurave namaha!!

⁶⁸ Chhatrapati Shivaji, Maharana Pratap, Jhansi Rani (Queen of the Maratha princely state of Jhansi) and Bhagat Singh are widely considered by Hindu nationalists to be symbols of nationalistic pride.

Meaning: Brahma, Lord Vishnu, Maheshwara embodied in the form of Sri Gurudev. I salute you.

Such routines seek to shape and sensitise the children to Hindu markers of behaviour, teaching them to celebrate birthdays and festivals according to Hindu traditions and epics. It also specifies religious practices, directing children how to meditate using Hindu prayers. Doron, in discussing the ‘Ideal Boy—Good Habits’ poster series in India, writes, ‘The cultivation of the model child-citizen was intimately connected to the performance of personal and domestic hygiene, which in turn was an attempt to constitute a “hygienic” public sphere full of “appropriately” domesticated bodies’.⁶⁹ (2016, 720). Likewise, making the children practice these routines allows the VKP to cultivate them into model ‘*Vanavasis*’. As with similar forms of extreme nationalism, here too, ideology and practice are packaged as ‘pure’, and uncontaminated by corrupting foreign influences.

It is evident that the VKP is not merely a welfare organisation for the Indigenous communities in India. From its founding by an RSS member, to its affiliation with Hindutva icons, to a guidebook saturated with Hindutva ideology, the VKP actively tries to shape and define tribal communities as ‘*Vanavasis*’. In the next section, I illustrate how the ideology of Hindutva is transformed into praxis in the VKP hostel. In particular, I describe how the hostel serves as the space where the ‘*Vanavasi*’ is cultivated and disciplined.

6.7 The VKP Hostel: Cultivating and Disciplining the ‘*Vanavasi*’

Upon my return to the village for fieldwork, I was told by one of the Koyas that the old hostel that I visited in 2013 had been demolished and replaced by a new VKP hostel. Clearly, the VKP was well-funded too, for the new building had an office for the warden, a fully equipped kitchen, a prayer hall and washrooms on the ground floor. On the second floor, there were rooms that served as living quarters for the youths and a guest room for visitors. Each room in the hostel is named after a Koya deity (Sammakka Sarakka), a tribal hero (Birsa Munda) or an Indian luminary (for example, Rabindranath Tagore). All the rooms were kept immaculately clean and neat. The prayer hall had pictures of Bharat Mata, Ram and the VKP founder adorning its walls (see Figure 6.2).

⁶⁹ The ‘Ideal Boy—Good Habits’ posters instructed children on everything from letters and numbers to an array of nationalist leaders and were common in classrooms across India during the early decades of India’s Independence.



Figure 6.2: VKP Hostel Prayer Hall

I walked to the classroom, where there were about 30 Koya boys (aged 8–13 years) sitting quietly and doing their homework under the watchful eye of a VKP volunteer, Madam Rani. Some of the boys recognised me from my frequent walks to Tadvai and greeted me with a smile. Madam Rani invited me to sit in the classroom while waiting for the warden to arrive. After a while, an ambulance pulled into the hostel and two men alighted. It was the warden and a doctor, Dr Kumar, a man in his late 50s. The warden brought out two chairs, and Dr Kumar and I sat in the main courtyard of the hostel.

Dr Kumar shared with me that he was an RSS member since his early teens. About six years ago, the RSS asked him to work in VKP and use his medical expertise for the welfare of the tribal community. Since then, he has been visiting the VKP hostels in Telangana to volunteer as a doctor. For about 20 days each month, he visits two or three villages each day, where, from morning to evening, he treats the sick and provides free medical advice to the villagers. Concurrently, he also tells them about VKP's programs, gives out brochures and encourages them to send their children to the hostels. While we were chatting, the boys had gathered in the courtyard for their daily games at around 4 in the afternoon. After about 20 minutes of games, the boys lined up in neat rows and began their physical training (see Figure 6.3).



Figure 6.3: Koya Boys Doing Physical Drills

The exercises during the physical training session included calisthenics and basic martial arts drills. As the drills went on, I felt a sense of unease because it reminded of my military training in Singapore when I was 18 years old. When the physical drills ended, the boys and the warden lined up in neat rows. Dr Kumar told me that the flag ceremony was starting (Figure 6.4). It was a short ceremony where everyone stood at attention while one of the boys placed the *bhagwa dhwaj* (saffron flag) on the pole (see Figure 6.4). After the flag was hoisted, everyone sang the RSS *prarthana* (prayer), saluted the flag and were dismissed. The boys went off for their bath, and I continued chatting with Dr Kumar.



Figure 6.4: RSS Bhagwa Dhwaj Ceremony

After some time, one of the boys informed us that the prayer session, or *pooja*, was starting. We went to the prayer room where the boys had gathered. A lamp was lit in front of three portraits, those of Lord Ram, Bharat Mata and the VKP founder, Balasaheb Deshpande. Led by one of the boys, the boys started to sing *bhajans* (Hindu devotional songs) and recite *shlokas* (Vedic hymns) while the warden looked on intently. After about 10 minutes, the boys stood up, clasped their hands together and bowed, while one of them took a lamp to circle the portraits and waft the incense smoke into them. This was a form of *aarti*, a Hindu ritual that marked the end of the *pooja* session. I was invited to have dinner with Dr Kumar, and we had a simple meal of *chapattis* and potato curry. After dinner, he handed me a booklet and explained that it was a guidebook given to the VKP hostels. As it was getting late, I took my leave from Dr Kumar and walked back to Kamaram.

From this brief description of the VKP hostel, which I visited on many occasions, I suggest that the hostel may be viewed as the epicentre of VKP's *Hindutva* project. The place relies on the tried and tested practices of RSS, where discipline and doctrine combine to cultivate the person, and in this case, Koya youths, in their journey to become 'Vanavasis'. Alder (2018b) makes a similar point in an article in which he discusses how school participants in a Hindu-nationalist-run formal school and hostel experience subjectification and engage with notions of ethical Hindu selfhood through performative practices. In other words, such practices are implemented across India by the RSS, and as I have shown, pedagogical institutions are especially effective spaces for cultivating and shaping the Koya youths into the *Hindutva*-prescribed template of 'Vanavasis'.

6.7.1 Duties, Diet and Discipline

The first thing that caught my eye while entering the hostel was a board that listed the daily duties of the hostel on which a name was allocated to each duty. The warden saw me staring intently at the board and informed me that it can be found in every VKP hostel. He said that the duties revolve around basic chores, such as cooking meals, cleaning the premises and gardening. The duties are rotated among the boys, and each boy is expected to complete the duty without fail. The older boys oversee the games, physical drills and preparations for the *pooja* session in the evening. Apart from performing these duties diligently, the boys have to follow a strict timetable within the hostel (see Figure 6.5). They wake up at 4.30 am, bathe and

prepare for the morning *pooja* at 5.30 am. Then, after breakfast, the boys head to school with a packed lunch. After returning from school, they sit in the prayer hall to do their homework under the watchful eyes of the warden or a VKP volunteer. At about 4 pm in the afternoon, the boys are served biscuits and *chai*. At about 5 pm, they head to the courtyard for games, drills and the flag ceremony. This is followed by the *pooja* session and then dinner at 8 pm. They head off to bed by 9 pm.

Figure 6.5: Daily Roster and Timetable

The clear allocation of duties and strict adherence to the timetable serve to create a form of disciplining space within the VKP hostel. This is reinforced by how acts of disobedience are swiftly dealt with. For example, I once saw the warden giving two big smacks on the thigh of one of the boys for failing to complete his homework properly. According to Froerer (2007a, 1035), who writes about how Hindutva is translated and implemented in pedagogical terms, views discipline as ‘understood by RSS ideologues and teachers alike to be the primary means through which moral education in the first instance inculcated, and through which pupils are eventually drawn into the project of nationalism’. The physical disciplining of these Koya boys is thus a key process for orientating these boys into internalising their identity as ‘*Vanavasis*’.

Dietary habits were equally important, and the VKP hostel served only vegetarian food. During a conversation with the warden at Hyderabad, I sought clarification about the food provided:

Elvin: Can I ask something? You said that you respect tribal culture, but in tribal culture, non-vegetarian food is part of their diet. May I know why is there is only vegetarian food here?

Warden: Yes, it is true that they eat meat. We do not stop them from eating meat when they go home. But in the hostel, they must eat vegetarian food only. Vegetarian food makes them strong and is better for them. It makes them more disciplined.

Many Hindus, especially of the Brahmanical tradition, hail vegetarianism as a fundamental aspect of Hinduism's moral superiority. Yet, here rhetoric far exceeds reality. The myth of India's vegetarianism has been debunked numerous times (Natarajan and Jacob 2018). The point is that it serves an ideological purpose, once again linked to the purity of nationhood. Ray (2016, 19) writes:

In an increasingly intolerant Hindutva-driven political climate, a politics of enforced vegetarian-based purity, functioning as a mark of authenticity and ideal nationalist identity, intersects with liberalisation of the economy and globalisation, to produce complex hierarchies of taste and ideas of culinary belonging.

Here, the emphasis on a vegetarian diet for the Koya youth marks them out as authentic 'Vanavasis' and creates a hierarchy of taste, where being non-vegetarian is seen as less desirable.⁷⁰

6.7.2 Learning to Be *Vanavasi* through Rituals

The table below shows the breakdown of the activities that must be held in every VKP hostel, as specified in the VKP manual (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1: Daily Activities in VKP Hostels

Item	Time allocated in minutes
Games, yoga exercises and other physical activities	30
Prayers, slokas, meditation and hymns	20
Subject knowledge (Hindi, Telugu and Mathematics)	60
General knowledge	30
Sanskrit knowledge, patriotic songs and stories	30
Verses, slokas and poems	10

⁷⁰ This resonates with the previous chapter where consumption of alcohol and non-vegetarian food are seen as social markers of non-Brahmanical or low caste communities. The observation here and that of the previous chapter highlight how food habits can reinforce Brahmanical notions and the tensions that exists in articulations of Koya identity.

This table reveals the learning of Hindu rituals alongside secular education. This learning is coupled with the exposure to Hindu sacred texts, religious prayers and life-stories of Hindu patriots. Hindu religious festivals and the birthdays of nationalist and religious leaders are also celebrated. Interestingly, no time is allocated towards educating the Koya youth on Koya culture, history, and religion. According to Alder, such activities demonstrate that ‘through participation in daily Sanskrit traditions, actors contextually transform themselves into subjects of a certain ethical system, what Foucault describes as certain “modes of subjectification”’ (2018b, 56). A similar process is evident here, the Koya boys in the VKP hostels are steadily shaped into the subjects of the *Hindutva* worldview, that is, transformed into ‘*Vanavasis*’.

6.7.3 VKP’s Public Outreach

Apart from the hostel and the welfare projects, another key aspect of VKP’s saffronising of the Koyas is manifested in its public outreach events. Here, I recall a short vignette from my first VKP event that I attended in 2013. I was invited by the warden to attend the annual VKP (Telangana) meeting held near Kamaram. When I arrived, there were 60 persons in attendance, comprising mainly families and children. The boys staying at the hostel presented a *dandiya*⁷¹ performance (see Figure 6.6), and the event concluded with speeches from VKP *swayamsevaks*. These speeches were largely focused on VKP’s contribution towards tribal welfare and how through the VKP, ‘tribal culture is preserved and protected’. Apart from these speeches, symbolic expressions of *Hindutva* were featured prominently in the event. For example, Figure 6.7 shows three pictures on a table placed at the venue: they depict, from left to right, the founder of VKP (Balasaheb Deshpande), Bharat Mata (Mother India) and Lord Ram.



Figure 6.6: Dandiya Performance by Koya VKP Boys



Figure 6.7: VKP Icons on Display

⁷¹ A traditional dance form that is to be performed in honour of the goddess Durga.

The presence of these pictures illustrates the links between VKP and *Hindutva*, as the photo of Balasaheb Deshpande is placed next to the pictures of two *Hindutva* icons, Bharat Mata and Lord Ram. The picture of Bharat Mata is an indispensable *Hindutva* icon for it encompasses Hindu nationalism and motherhood in one image (Ramaswamy 2010; Uberoi 2002). This also signifies that every person, and by extension, every Koya, born in India is a Hindu. This is supplemented by a picture of Lord Ram. The image of Ram is significant, as Stuart Corbridge points out, Ram is ‘a particularly male and martial (kingly) incarnation of Vishnu... [who engaged in] epic battles with Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka, to rescue his wife, Sita, and to regain his throne in Ayodhya’ (1999, 234). The Ramayana epic and similar iconographies have been deployed to advance nationalist sentiments and are also very much part of everyday life (see Lutgendorf 1995). In our case, it alludes to how *Hindutva* organisations are portrayed as protectors and rescuers of Mother India who is under constant threat from foreign invaders, not least Muslims. As Corbridge succinctly put it: ‘a Mother that had been raped by the Muslims and the British (the “two invasions” referred to by Hindu nationalists), and whose honour could only be restored by men and women who resisted “the emasculation of the Hindu Community”’(Corbridge 1999, 235). After this VKP event ended, a group of VKP *swayamsevaks* walked to the statue of Komaram Bheem, a hero of the Koya community, and paid homage by placing a *tilaka* on the statue’s forehead (see Figure 6.8). Placing a *tilaka* on a forehead is a Hindu gesture that ascribes honour to the person. Thus, the featuring of these pictures prominently at a VKP event illustrates how the VKP infuses *Hindutva* ideology in their public outreach. This is followed up by the honouring of Komaram Bheem as a way to signify the close affinity between the VKP and the Koya community.



Figure 6.8: VKP Members Paying Homage to Komaram Bheem

Another prominent feature of VKP programs is an annual sport events for tribal youths, *Ekalavya Khelkood*. The use of Ekalavya as a nomenclature is of interest. In the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, Ekalavya is a young prince of the Nishadha, a forest tribe. He honed his archery skills by worshipping a clay statue of Drona, a famed Brahmin guru to the Kauravas and the Pandavas. When Drona learned that Ekalavya had perfected his archery skills by installing the statue, he asked Ekalavya for his *gurudakshina* (the tradition of repaying one's guru after a period of guidance) in the form of his right thumb. Ekalavya chopped off his thumb for Dronacharya without hesitation. Ekalavya was lauded for his submission to the guru–student relationship, a key tenet in Hinduism. The use of Ekalavya as an icon indicates how the VKP imagine the idealised characterisation of tribal communities, where they are admired for their talents and celebrated for submission to Hindu values. The appropriation of Ekalavya is not limited to the assimilation of tribal communities. Narayan (2021, 12) describes how the Sangh Parivar appropriates the Eklavya myth to ‘claim the Dalit community has traditionally produced *Dharmaparayan Dalit Mahapurush* (great dharma-following Dalit men) and that as a community Dalits are totally committed to Hindu cultural values’. Further, Ekalavya is also appropriated by some communities as a form of resistance to dominant Brahminical culture. Doron (2010a, 773–5) describes how Ekalavya has been retold to express the ‘hypocrisy and violence of elite ideology and its oppression of low castes’. Thus, these public events allow the

VKP to promote themselves as a welfare organisation for the Koyas and, guardians of ‘traditional’ tribal heroes, as Ekalavya while concurrently, infusing *Hindutva* in their events. Here, the narrative construction of identity is a contested one, whereby *Hindutva* propagates its own version of the past to cast tribals in a particular way that incorporates them into the fold of Hinduism. This process is distilled in the term, *Vanavasi*, which I have detailed so far. Yet, the Koyas are well aware of this appropriation and although they do not overtly oppose the VKP, they have managed to both assert their own identities in the form of narrative or as assertive claims that shift according to context.

6.8 *Swayamsevaks* and Their *Seva*: Lifeblood of the VKP

In one of my visits to the VKP headquarters, I met Sharma, a retiree in his late 60s with a jolly demeanour. He was quite happy to talk to me about the VKP and his role as a *swayamsevak* in the VKP hostel. When I asked him about his motivations for joining the VKP, he said:

When I was a young boy, I joined the RSS *shakha* in my town. Then I became *swayamsevak* in the RSS for many years. When I retired from my job, I met Rama, the organising secretary of the VKP, at the RSS *karyalaya* [office] in Hyderabad. He introduced me to the VKP and asked me to help him, to do some *seva* for the *Vanavasis*. He invited me to do *seva*; that’s why I joined the VKP. Our organisation [referring to the VKP] is now working in total all India, Kashmir to Kanyakumari [a town in Tamil Nadu], from Gujarat to Puri. Total, east, west, north, south, it is working. Education, medical, in all aspects, it is working.

Apart from reiterating the strong affiliation between the RSS and the VKP, where RSS *swayamsevaks* [volunteers] serve as volunteers in the VKP, Sharma describes his work in the VKP as constituting a form of *seva*. In this section, I focus on this idea of *seva* and suggest that the *swayamsevaks* of the VKP are not merely people keen in cultivating their sense of altruism. Rather, through analysing the work of a *swayamsevak* in the VKP as *seva*, I suggest that the concept of *seva*, when deployed in the context of the work of the VKP, facilitates *Hindutva* ideology, which is translated into a form of ethical praxis. The *swayamsevaks* view their *seva* as beneficial for the Koyas in Telangana. Here, I maintain that these *swayamsevaks* engage in a process of moral cultivation as they invest their time and resources doing *seva* at the VKP. In the final section, I’ll discuss how these *swayamsevaks* and their *seva* are key to understanding what Alder terms the ‘unrecognised shades of Hindu nationalism’ (2018a, 433). By ‘unrecognised shades’, we can see how rather than simply viewing the spread of *Hindutva* among the Koyas as forceful and fuelled by an exclusionary rhetoric, it is necessary to understand that it is through the persistent *seva* of the *swayamsevaks* in everyday life that the VKP injects vitality into its project.

6.8.1 Seva as Ethical Practice

To understand fully how the *swayamsevaks* view their work in the VKP as *seva*, it is important to first establish the meaning of *seva* in relation to the ideological and organisational apparatus of *Hindutva*. The word *seva* is of Sanskrit origin and is generally defined as ‘service that is performed “impersonally and selflessly” without any expectations of “reciprocity, reward, protection or patronage”’ (Warrier 2005, 59). The nature of *seva* serves as an effective strategy for the RSS and its propagation of *Hindutva* in two ways (Jaffrelot 2005, 221). First, it creates an accessible point of entry for people who may not be overt supporters of *Hindutva* but are open to doing welfare work. Second, it attracts the support and patronage of government bodies and philanthropists. In her research on the RSS’s involvement in disaster relief, Bhattacharjee (2019, 54–78) examines the multiple meanings of *seva* in different contexts. She concludes with two features that are relevant to my discussion of the *swayamsevaks* characterising their work amongst the Koyas as *seva* (Bhattacharjee 2019, 78).⁷²

First, Bhattacharjee states that the idea of selflessness sets *seva* apart from other forms of social action. Second, the spontaneity of *seva* appeals to people’s moral imagination. The twin characteristics of selflessness and spontaneity are exemplified in the type of activities that the VKP *swayamsevaks* engage in. For example, in my second visit to the VKP hostel in Hyderabad, I observed a *swayamsevak* giving tuition lessons to a group of Koya boys (see Figure 6.9). I learned that this math tutor was a teacher in a government school in Hyderabad. He visited the hostel every Saturday to provide free lessons for the Koya boys and any children living near the hostel. When I chatted with the warden about this, he explained that the *swayamsevaks* in the VKP would often contribute in any way they could, be it hostel maintenance, tuition lessons or playing games with the boys (see Figure 6.10).

⁷² According to Bhattacharjee (2019, 78), *seva* may have ‘different motivations in different circumstances: religious (in *Bhakti* tradition), moral (*seva* to parents and guru) and instrumental (as a nationalist ethic)’.



Figure 6.9: VKP Swayamsevak Dispensing Advice to Boys in a Hostel



Figure 6.10: VKP Swayamsevak Playing Games with Boys in a Hostel

On examining these quotidian acts of *seva* by the VKP *swayamsevaks*, I argue that such acts establish *seva* as an ethical practice that accommodates sacrifice and selfless action. Here, I draw on Lambek's insights in *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action*, where he talks about the ethical as 'intrinsic to action' and observes, 'I look at action in two related ways—as specific acts (performance) and ongoing judgment (practice)—and show that ethics is a function of each' (2010,39). Be it preparing vegetarian meals, offering free tuition lessons or engaging youths in physical drills, together, these are acts of *seva* inseparable from ethical

performances. They allow the *swayamsevaks* to project themselves as doing good for the Koya boys and, simultaneously, educate the Koyas on what is good for them. Lambek further elaborates that ‘ethics entails judgment (evaluation) with respect to situations, actions, and, cumulatively, actors, persons, or character’ (2010, 43). The *swayamsevaks* in the VKP hold a strong conviction that the Koyas should see themselves as ‘*Vanavasis*’, part of the Hindu fold. It is through their *seva* performed in the VKP that they facilitate this inculcation. Another example is the preparation of vegetarian meals for the Koya boys in the hostel. which is clearly not merely to feed the Koyas and alleviate hunger. Rather, they view vegetarianism as an ethical stance that is in line with the narrative of being ‘*Vanavasi*’ and aligned with Hindutva principles. Hence, *seva* is an ethical practice as it entails doing ‘what is good’ for the Koyas, underpinned by evaluative judgement on what constitutes ‘good’ and ‘moral’ for the Koyas, an issue I turn to next.

6.8.2 *Swayamsevaks* as Moral Cultivators

One afternoon, I was talking to another VKP *swayamsevak*, Ashok. He had joined the RSS at a young age, and when he retired from his job, he was asked to volunteer at the VKP. I present a short excerpt from our conversation below, which was in English:

Elvin: What do you do at the hostel?

Ashok: I teach culture, what is our Indian tradition, and how to behave to our elders, how to give respect.

Elvin: What do you think are the main problems facing the tribal people?

Ashok: Actually here, main problem is they are uneducated people. Illiterate people is there. They are completely illiterate and don’t know the culture and how to behave. So, we have to educate them, to improve their knowledge and help them utilise government programs and schemes.

Elvin: I see, you mentioned that education is one problem that the tribals are facing.

Ashok: Education, health and good habits.

Elvin: Could you talk a bit more about good habits?

Ashok: They have bad habits, like taking alcohol and they eat the meat of animals. These are not good habits. Before coming here, they have many bad habits. After this training and education [in VKP], they will learn good things.

Elvin: You were saying earlier that you joined Seva Bharati and then VKP. You mentioned that you are a non-tribal; I am interested to know why you would help in a tribal organisation.

Ashok: (laughs) It is my duty to serve, to do *seva*. To help the ignored people; there are many of them. How to take bath, how to have good habits, like that. So, I have to help improve them.

My conversation with Ashok reminded me of M. S. S. Golwalkar's famed position as an RSS icon. He wrote an exposition, 'I Am an Ordinary Swayamsevak' (RSS Website, 'Being a Swayamsevak'). Golwalkar emphasises that a *swayamsevak* has a sense of responsibility and fulfils his duty to make his nation 'mighty'. This resonates with my interactions with the VKP *swayamsevaks*. Like Ashok, many of them had joined the RSS at a young age and came to serve in the VKP at the behest of the organisation. In my visits to the VKP hostels, the VKP *swayamsevaks* would always engage me in conversations and were friendly towards me, offering me *chai* and biscuits each time I visited the hostel. I felt dissonant because my image of *swayamsevaks* tends to one of violence, where these hard-line adherents of *Hindutva* would shout 'Jai Shri Ram', holding their *lathis* in the air and participating in acts of violence. As I spent time interacting with them, I soon realised that these *swayamsevaks* really believed in their responsibilities to help the VKP shape the Koyas into '*Vanavasis*'. They would often remind me that it is their duty to help these Koya boys and to 'improve and educate them'.

In his study of the Kallar community in Tamil Nadu, Anand Pandian proposed an expansion on the idea of morality to encompass the full experience of material and spiritual life. According to Pandian's definition, morality is to be realised in the

practical techniques through which people may engage their own desires, deeds, and habits in the pursuit of a model life, and the material labor that may transform a world of embodied experience into an environment for both moral and natural growth (Pandian 2009, 3).

In a similar vein, I argue that by serving in the VKP, these *swayamsevaks* engage in a process of moral cultivation. This process works on two interlinked levels. On the basic level, they cultivate morals among the Koyas by teaching them what is 'good' for them, as mentioned in the earlier section. I suggest that on another level, which is the focus of my analysis here, in taking on the role of VKP *swayamsevaks*, these people internalise a moral impetus, which leads them towards engaging in practical techniques and material labour, as elaborated above. This moral impetus and direction are both embodied and performed by the VKP *swayamsevaks* whose *seva* is designed to help Koyas realise their better selves as '*Vanavasis*' who contribute to the building of a *Hindu Rashtra*.

Let me further illustrate this with another short example from fieldwork. Despite his busy schedule as a headmaster, Ramesh, a VKP *swayamsevak*, would spend a large portion of his

free time helping out in the hostel. During my visits to the hostel, I observed how he would check on every boy and ask them about their studies and health and whether he was getting enough food and rest. Before dinner, Ramesh would help cut the vegetables and instruct the boys on the dishes to prepare. When I spoke to some of the boys, they described how Ramesh would visit them regularly and ensure everything was running smoothly. His visits to the hostel were so frequent that during my fieldwork, I knew where to find him if he was not at home. One evening, Ramesh took out a pamphlet that featured a picture of a VKP hostel, a list of donors' names with his name included and some details on VKP's programs and activities. He said with a sense of pride, 'I have donated money to this hostel and helped to raise funds. We have permission to build and when you visit again, you will see the new hostel. We are doing good work here'.⁷³ He would also go to tribal villages and dissuade people from converting to Christianity or Islam. His key aim was to remind Koyas that 'tribals are *Vanavasis*'. The act of preventing conversions is one of the highly controversial tactics used by *Hindutva* groups to assert the primacy of the Hindu religion, a key tenet in *Hindutva*.⁷⁴ Recently, the debate around 'forced reconversions' made headlines because the *Hindutva* groups launched a '*ghar wapsi* movement (returning Christians and Muslims to Hinduism)'. These campaigns aim to prevent religious conversions and stem the spread of Christianity, and some such campaigns have led to violent clashes in Gujarat and Odisha (Ponniah 2017; Shani 2011). When I asked Ramesh about the controversy surrounding such activities, he replied that it is all about 'educating the tribals' and 'there is nothing wrong since it is part of the good work of VKP to educate the tribals'.

This vignette illustrates how these *swayamsevaks* view their involvement in VKP's activities as 'good'. In doing so, they see themselves as moral beings who perform ethical work to help uplift the tribals. This belief serves as a powerful motivating force and allows them to justify certain actions even though these are contentious. In his latest book, *Republic of Hindutva* (2021), Narayan observes:

The RSS is now no longer an organisation where the volunteers wield spears or sticks. The volunteers today wield a far more powerful weapon, which is the mission of creating a sociocultural hegemony that would include the entire Hindu community and even many traditionally non-Hindu tribals and other minority groups (2021, 13).

⁷³ I translated this conversation, which was held in Telugu, into English.

⁷⁴ *Hindutva* groups have accused churches of forcibly converting poor Hindus by offering them money or other forms of support as bribes. In the name of preventing such acts, these groups have engaged in violence against Christians, such as burning churches, disrupting church events and attacking Christians (S. Sarkar 1999; Vandeveldt 2011).

By viewing *seva* as a form of ethical practice and *swayamsevaks* as moral cultivators, we begin to observe the strategies through which such hegemony is formed, with the increasingly pervasive influence of the VKP in the tribal communities of India as a case in point.

6.9 From Tadvai to Hyderabad: Neo-*Hindutva* in the Form of *Vikas*

It was a cool Sunday in the VKP hostel at Hyderabad, and I had arrived for my meeting with the hostel warden. The hostel was buzzing with activity as the youths in the hostel were either playing games in the courtyard, doing their allocated duties or attending lessons taught by a VKP *swayamsevak*. I sat at the stone steps of the hostel, observing the bustling activity while waiting for the warden. As a foreigner, I stood out, and I could see the youths talking among themselves and gesticulating towards me. Soon, one of the VKP *swayamsevaks*, Mr Reddy, walked over to me and we started chatting. He was accompanied by four youths from the hostel, and under the watchful eye of Mr Reddy, I struck a casual conversation with the youths, who seemed to be about 17 to 19 years old. They were Koyas and had stayed in the VKP hostels in rural areas before coming to Hyderabad. They had secured admission to degree colleges in Hyderabad and were pursuing either commerce or ophthalmology degrees.⁷⁵ My conversation with the youths turned to the question of education, and their experience in the hostel:

Youth A: It is good here. Everything is provided and I get good education. If I stayed in my village, I would only do 'time pass' and waste time. When I get educated, I want to go back and help my village.

Youth B: There is discipline here and a good routine. Every day, we go to school, and we have a good future.

Upon hearing the conversation, Mr Reddy immediately interjected that all the Koya youths in the VKP hostels have graduated with degrees and gone on to find employment in Hyderabad or other cities in India. He added that the VKP *swayamsevaks* will guide these youths and help them fulfil their aspirations. To validate his point, Mr Reddy beckoned one of the youths over and declared: 'Rajesh likes filmmaking. Let him show you. You open YouTube on your phone'. I opened the app and Rajesh showed me some of the YouTube videos that he had created. Mr Reddy was bent on demonstrating that the VKP is fully invested in the welfare of the Koya youths under their care. It is important to note that as I am an outsider, I was not given permission to talk to the youths without a VKP *swayamsevak* present. The presence of the VKP *swayamsevak* reflected VKP's need to control the narrative of their work among the Koyas.

⁷⁵ When I asked the youths about their choice of degrees, they mentioned that these degrees provided them with better job prospects.

These VKP swayamsevak seemed to consider it important to present the VKP to an outsider like me as a welfare organisation focused on the welfare and development of these Koya youths.

The presence of a VKP swayamsevak during all my conversations with the Koya youths made it difficult to ascertain whether these youths were toeing the line of the VKP or whether they truly felt that staying in a VKP hostel was beneficial for them. The two are not mutually exclusive and difficult to establish. Regardless, in my interactions with these Koya youths at the hostel, I sensed that they were glad to have come out of their rural areas and to be given the opportunity to study in Hyderabad. Furthermore, given the extensive networks of the VKP *swayamsevak*s, the VKP is well placed to ensure employment opportunities for the Koya youths, which enhances their appeal to the Koyas and other tribal communities in Telangana.

The ways in which the VKP facilitates and channels the aspirations of the Koyas raises an interesting point about it as a *Hindutva* organisation. In India, *Hindutva* organisations such as Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu Parishad are known to perpetuate violence in the name of protecting ‘Indian culture’. A famous instance was when activists from both organisations campaigned in 2016 to demand a ban on Valentine’s Day, claiming that it was against ‘Indian culture’, and threatened couples who celebrated Valentine’s Day openly in public parks. These instances point to how *Hindutva* organisations are viewed as perpetrators of militant Hindu nationalism and their members are capable of enacting violence (Katju 2003; Mathur 2008). Thus, the dominant scholarly view of *Hindutva* organisations is that they are violent, destructive and oppressive entities, holding an essentialised view of Hinduism that is exclusionary and oppressive for Muslims and other minorities (see also Jaffrelot 2005; 2007; Leidig 2020; Narayanan 2021).

Coupled with the political ascendancy of the BJP in recent years, the saffron wave has swept across India, promoted by state actors and shaping the sentiment among the masses towards *Hindutva* (Chacko 2018; Hansen 1999; Palshikar 2015). The appeal of the VKP to the Koyas and other tribal communities in India extends beyond the ideology and filters to everyday life—as I have detailed in this chapter. E. Anderson and Longkumer add another dimension to this popularity, which they describe as ‘neo-*Hindutva*’,

a starting point for thinking about the dynamic and idiosyncratic ways in which Hindu nationalism has evolved over recent years, often into increasingly mainstream and normalized (but also obfuscated) forms of rhetoric and mobilization (2018, 373–4).

According to their view, the ‘neeness’ of *Hindutva* should be seen as sufficiently diverse to appeal to the complex milieu of Indian society. As regards the VKP, what we see is a form of neo-*Hindutva* that lays emphasis on notions of development and progress, hailed as ‘*vikas*’. Sahoo (2008a, 466) discusses how the VKP used development projects to legitimise itself among the tribal communities in Rajasthan and to embark on a ‘continuous and planned process of political socialisation of the tribal populations into the ideology of *Hindutva*’. As I have shown, the VKP’s programs in Telangana operate along the same lines. These serve as a medium through which *Hindutva* narratives can be made relevant to the tribal communities and orientate their integration into the Hindu fold. The ‘neo-ness’ is reflected in VKP’s programs in which a pathway to ‘*vikas*’ and access to social mobility and upliftment is provided for tribal communities.

The statement made by one of the Koya boys, ‘If I stayed in the village, I will only do timepass and waste time’ serves as an example. The term ‘timepass’ is commonly used by Indian youths to denote the passing of time in an unproductive manner. Jeffrey (2010, 2017) argues that the act of ‘timepass’ can be unpacked to reveal different meanings for Indian youths. ‘Timepass’ can connote ‘detachment from one’s situation and the sense of being entitled to a more exciting life elsewhere’ (Jeffrey 2017, 408). It is also a ‘social act’ where youths share the experience of ‘waiting to realise their aspirations, come to strike up friendships and develop shared goals’ (Jeffrey 2017, 409). For many tribal youths in Telangana, Hyderabad’s rapid economic development has become a desired destination for them to transit from ‘timepass’ and invest their time in more productive pursuits. However, many of them find it difficult to thrive after moving from the village to the city. Owing to a lack of education and networks, many who move to urban areas face abject poverty and need to engage in low-wage work. The VKP, with its hostel in Hyderabad and welfare programs, appeals to these youths for they view it as a pathway to attain social mobility and gain access to networks and opportunities, at little to no personal cost.

This situation raises the question whether these youths adopt the *Hindutva* ideology wholesale and go on to be the future ‘*swayamsevaks*’ of the RSS. From my interactions with the youths in the VKP hostel, I suggest that it is not guaranteed that they will become fervent supporters of *Hindutva*. Some of the youths shared that they were already Hindus prior to them joining the VKP hostels. One of them said, ‘We do the same [rituals] in our village only. Our parents are Hindus, so are we’. This indicates that their stay in the VKP hostel has reified their identity as Hindus, but this may not necessarily translate into them being the future ‘*swayamsevaks*’ of the

RSS. Furthermore, in deciding to stay in the VKP hostel, there is an instrumentalist aspect as these youths receive assistance to pursue their education and gain access to employment opportunities. Although some tribal youths, such as Thiru, return to serve in the VKP and propagate the *Hindutva* ideology, it is not a guaranteed or even desired outcome for many of the youths. This is further reflected in the fact that some of these VKP *swayamsevaks* are from largely non-tribal communities. However, as the VKP continues its expansion plans in the tribal areas, coupled with the mainstreaming of *Hindutva* in India's political consciousness, it is highly possible that the pathway to 'vikas' and access to social mobility and upliftment for these youths will feature strong ties and commitments to *Hindutva* ideology.

Finally, it is important to note that many of the VKP *swayamsevaks* portray themselves as successful role models for the Koya boys in the hostel. As mentioned in the earlier section, the VKP *swayamsevaks* are mostly middle-aged men and retirees. Many of them have held, or still hold, managerial and executive-level jobs. Through their daily interaction with the Koya boys, the youths are likely to view them as role models and internalise the notion that the VKP is guiding them towards 'vikas'.

By merely focusing on the narrative that *Hindutva* organisations use to promote their cause, the oppressive and violent aspects are often foregrounded in the literature. Yet there is a risk of obscuring how *Hindutva* is also operating effectively through welfare projects that facilitate the integration of tribal communities into the Hindu fold. The political scientist Gill Kepel (1994), in his research on the resurgence of religious belief in the modern world, raises two relevant points. First, he argues that revivalist and fundamentalist groups are fuelled by a 'militant membership of young, educated, and modern people ... that seek to recreate society according to a set of symbols and values in accordance with their holy scripture' (Kepel 1994, 2). Moreover, each of these groups 'pursues both a strategy from above, attempting to seize state power and use state legislation to promote its ends, and a strategy from below, evangelizing the masses and seeking to take control of their daily lives' (Kepel 1994, 2). Likewise, the VKP is cultivating a membership of young and educated Koya youths to help propagate *Hindutva* on the grassroots level. The VKP has shown that, through its welfare programs and facilitating the pathways of 'vikas' and social mobility in its hostel and beyond, it is an attractive option for the tribal communities in India, many of whom suffer systemic marginalisation. As the VKP continues its expansion plans, such pathways become increasingly accessible and attractive to the tribal communities.

6.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I sought to illustrate how the VKP, part of the Sangh Parivar, uses welfare and ‘vikas’ as a conduit to propagate the *Hindutva* ideology among the Koyas in India. VKP seeks to couch Koya identity in India as ‘*Vanavasi*’, whereby tribal communities are considered an ‘inseparable part of the Hindu society and Hindu in every sense’ (S. N. Saxena 2004, 19). This approach fits the overall goal of creating a *Hindu Rashtra* in India. Through their welfare programs and events and by building hostels in tribal areas (material culture), the VKP creates sites for Koya boys to be shaped into ‘*Vanavasis*’ through a daily routine of discipline and cultivation. To fuel this project, the VKP is helmed by legions of *swyamsevaks* that view their involvement as ‘*seva*’: a grassroots type service to the wider cause. Drawing on the *Hindutva* ideology and driven by the motivation to make India ‘mighty, confident and glorious’, these *swyamsevaks* take on the responsibility to shape the Koyas as ‘*Vanavasis*’, further contributing to the creation of a *Hindu Rashtra*. The efficacy of the VKP lies in how it creates a form of neo-*Hindutva* that is imbued with notions of development and progress, or ‘*vikas*’. This means that alongside ideological elements, VKP’s projects and institutions are enabling Koya youths to achieve their aspirational goals by facilitating their movement from rural areas to cities and by helping them to secure jobs. Although there are no statistics to show how many of the youths have attained employment after their stint in the VKP hostels, the VKP networks provide a useful path for many tribal communities living in precarity.

A couple of days before leaving the field, I walked to the VKP hostel in Tadvai to bid farewell to the boys, the warden and Dr Kumar. When I reached the hostel, I was surprised to see that it was quiet except for the warden, who was playing with his toddler in the courtyard. I asked the warden why the hostel was empty. He replied that the Telangana State Government had announced a week of holidays owing to the Samakka Sarakka Jatara, and hence, the boys had been given permission to return to their villages and celebrate the *Jatara*. I asked the warden cheekily, ‘What if they do not come back?’ The warden calmly replied, ‘They will always come back’.

When I pondered over this short exchange, I realised that the warden’s confidence is reflective of the perceived efficacy of the VKP’s propagation of neo-*Hindutva* among the Koyas. Although the hostel is a place where, unlike in their homes, the Koya boys experience discipline and routine, the hostel is also a place of socialisation and joy for many of them. Moreover, tribal customs are not denigrated; in fact, tribal practices and festivals are tolerated, even if they do

not align with the strict ideology of *Hindutva*. This allows the VKP to continue portraying itself as an accommodating organisation designed for the welfare of tribal communities in India, while not compromising on its mission to integrate the tribal communities into the Hindu fold. Given the current political climate in India, where *Hindutva* has become mainstream and the BJP continues its political dominance, the VKP will continue to thrive and expand its outreach in India, with its program of convincing even more tribal youths that ‘We are *Vanavasis*’.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In October 2019, when I returned to Kamaram, together with my wife, Amy after our marriage in Singapore, I felt mixed feelings as I realised that this visit to Kamaram was about to come to an end. Still, I was happy to share the news of my marriage with friends, many of whom I had had the pleasure to spend much time over the past year. When I reached Santhosh's home and showed the wedding photos to him and the Koya elders, they were delighted and were curious to know more about the rituals involved in the Chinese-Singaporean wedding. It was a strange experience, as I felt like we had exchanged places and now they – the so called 'subjects' of my study – were the anthropologists trying to make sense of a culture that was foreign to their own in terms of practices and lifecycle rituals. I told them about the various rituals and arrangements that were required for a successful Chinese Christian wedding in Singapore. They were bemused at some of the similarities with Koya marriage practices, for example, providing food for everyone at the wedding and receiving the bride at her home. After some lively discussion, I noticed that the youths of the village were not around. I asked Santhosh about their whereabouts, and he gave a wry smile, saying 'they are preparing something special'.

In the evening, the Koya elders ushered me away from Amy into a small room and handed me an all-white kurta and a lungi – traditional attire worn on special occasions. They told me to change, and Amy was led to another house in the village, where she was given a sari to change into. I quickly realised that the Koyas were organising our wedding celebration in their own traditions and was deeply moved by this gesture. Nevertheless, I tried my best to dissuade them, as I didn't want them to go through the hassle of organising such an event. Santhosh brushed my concerns away, saying that 'You are one of us now. This is your home also. Let us celebrate your wedding'. Knowing that it was futile to raise any more objections, I quickly changed into my wedding attire and once Amy had changed into her sari, we were ushered to the front of a small procession. Santhosh then guided the procession to a small field near the village. Upon reaching the field, the youths had already prepared a small stage and decorated it with balloons. We were ushered into the stage and sat there, while the families in Kamaram came up to feed us sweets. Some families gave us gifts and their blessings. We took photos and the celebration ended with a sumptuous community feast of chicken curry and rice (see Figure 7.1).



Figure 7.1: Wedding Celebration in Kamaram

Both my wife and I were deeply moved by this kind gesture from the Koyas of Kamaram and it reflected their hospitality and warmth ever since I started the fieldwork. I was a foreigner, practising an age-old anthropological method and an apparent oxymoron – participant-observation. Throughout my time with the Koyas in Kamaram, I was trying to make sense of a ‘culture’ that is distinct from mine. I probed and investigated their everyday lives, myths, and interactions, ethnonyms. I listened to their plight and ‘forced’ them to be as clear as possible, to explain the ‘basics’ as it were. I believed that once people in the village understood my commitment to my work, they were equally interested in contributing to my study and actively shape this thesis, in terms of what was written, seen, and heard. I too sought to contribute to the lives of the Koyas, by helping the Koya youths with their university admissions, providing them training in basic fieldwork methods, accompanying the youths on field trips and helping to distribute flyers during Arjun’s electoral campaign. In all, the Koyas received me with remarkable generosity and patience and sought to make my stay there as comfortable as possible, even to the extent of celebrating my marriage. To be sure, as in many anthropological studies, there were challenges, and those who sought to ‘appropriate’ the anthropologist to advance their agenda (see the opening vignette of Chapter 3 where I was invited on stage to give a speech at the inaugural World Adivasi Day). There were also tensions within the Koya community, with differing and sometimes opposing views regarding religious practices, politics, and aspirations. It showed that the Koyas, like many other tribal communities in India, take on different subject positions as they seek to negotiate and forge their respective paths in life.

The wedding celebration was a fitting end to my fieldwork that I could celebrate an important event in my life with them. After all, the Koyas of Kamaram had welcomed me into their lives and over the course of the fieldwork, I've learnt about their histories, cultural practices, and political orientations and strategies. My wedding celebration could be viewed as an event that distilled some of these distinctly Koya cultural practices. At first glance, the marriage photograph, in terms of the clothing, flowers, and postures, depicts a typical Hindu wedding. However, having attended a couple of Koya weddings during my fieldwork, I can attest that the wedding celebration was arranged in a 'tribal' fashion, with me being dressed in all white, and the provision of a non-vegetarian community feast as per Koya wedding customs. Yet, the feeding of sweets and the presence of fire (depicted in the form of two candles) are part of Hindu wedding customs: 'mixing and matching' was on display (see chapter 5 on *Jataras* and *Pandugas*). These arrangements illustrated how tribal symbolism, in terms of clothing and food practices, that represented what is distinctly Koya, are intertwined with external Hindu influences, resulting in a new hybrid narrative of identity. It draws on a sequential past that celebrates Koya culture while recognising the influence of Hinduism and hence, distilled in social action and rituals. In a similar fashion, the thesis braided multiple strands of identity that together try and tell a coherent story of how the Koyas construct their narrative identity, with relation to state and non-state actors. The thesis also sought to highlight the agency they exercise and are afforded as Koyas navigate the constraints placed upon them by these institutions and actors.

These experiences with the Koyas have allowed me to gain valuable insights that coalesce around what I described in the thesis as the narrative construction of identity. Central to this construction, I have argued, are the ethnonyms that serve as narratives of 'social life' for the Koyas, leading to multiple articulations, contestations and articulations of Koya identity. These ethnonyms are expressed in certain patterns, or narrative sequences, that I have elaborated in Table 1.1 of the thesis introduction. Some of these sequences that surround, for example, *Koitur*, highlight the agency of the Koyas in articulating their own sense of cultural identity. Other narratives are more about identity claims and strategic assertions of identity, as reflected in *Adivasi*, *ST*, *Jataras and Pandugas*, *Vanavasi*.

In Chapter 2, I discussed how the Koya youths of Kamaram formed an organisation to embark on a research project on Koya Indigenous knowledge. The research project culminated in the publication of a book and a successful three-day book launch event that was attended by government officials, scholars and Koyas from various parts of Telangana. By doing research

on their own history and culture – which they seek to actively define – Koya youths were able to create their own narrative of Koya identity, which is encapsulated in the ethnonym ‘*Koitur*’. Here, I argued that ‘*Koitur*’ is not merely an archaic term for ‘Koya’. Rather, it is a term that represented the efforts by the Koyas to engage in a decolonising endeavour by centring their perspectives on what constitutes Koya Indigenous knowledge. As I illustrated in Chapter 2, the term ‘decolonising’ is particularly instructive in reminding us of the systems of colonisation and oppression that have been put in place by various governments and organisations in the past. These systems have taken many forms, including policy, social organisations, cultural categories, and economic imperatives. By engaging in these decolonising projects, the Koyas sought the restoration of independence and self-determination through a range of strategies, as well as the recognition and redress of past injustices. The goal of decolonisation was in part achieved through a careful re-construction of narrative identities that highlight the Koyas’ contributions to cultural and material relations – which I examined through the thesis. As I argued in this chapter, by participating in this project, the Koya youths, in particular, were engaging in a form of prefigurative politics, where they shape and articulate their vision of Koya identity on their own terms. In doing so, it oriented the Koyas towards a reimagined future in which tribal communities in India are not defined by anachronistic tropes.

In recognition of the efforts by the Koyas, the Tribal Welfare Department sponsored the construction of a small building in Kamaram to facilitate their research. The building was named ‘Birsa Munda Youth Research Centre’ and the youths resumed their research activities in late 2021 (see Figure 7.2).⁷⁶ In 2022, the Commissioner of Tribal Welfare Department, Dr. Christina Z. Chongthu, visited the building during the Samakka Sarakka Jatara and was given a warm welcome by Arjun and the youths (see Figure 7.3). The visit by this high ranking official, similar to the reception of Santosh’s Koya Telugu dictionary by TCRTI officials (see Chapter 4), represents a form of validation of the research by the Koyas in Kamaram and affirmation of the Koyas as ‘model citizens’ of the state. It also situates the Tribal Welfare Department as a stakeholder in the research work of the Koyas, which provides an avenue for government officials to collaborate and possibly, exert their influence over the research. This exchange and interactions furthered the Koyas of Kamaram experience of what I have described

⁷⁶ The building was named after Birsa Munda, a tribal hero. The rationale is similar to what was discussed in Chapter 2, where the appropriation of Birsa Munda in the name of the village youth organisation reflects an aspirational desire of the Koya youths.

as the ‘everyday state’, where the state is manifested in localised forms and interacts with people at the grassroots level.



Figure 7.2: Birsa Munda Youth Research Centre (Photo Credit: Arjun)



Figure 7.3: Commissioner of Tribal Welfare Department (Telangana), Dr Christina Z. Chongthu (Circled in Yellow) Talking with Arjun and the BMYK (Photo Credit: Arjun)

For 2023, the Koya youths have planned to conduct more fieldtrips to further deepen their insights on Koya Indigenous knowledge and release an updated version of the book. They also plan to collaborate with scholars from tribal communities to organise workshops on tribal culture and history. This reflects the dynamic nature of Koya identity and new articulations, like *Koitur*, can emerge as the Koya youths of Kamaram continue in their decolonising endeavour. As Stuart Hall reminds us in his interview with Grossberg (1986, 53), articulations act as bricoleurs to assemble ‘ideological elements’ in a coherent manner to inform their

projects. It allows, in our case, for the Koyas to articulate narratives as ‘fit for purpose’ and shows that a narrative construction of identity can emerge as an assertion that makes claims to indigeneity and a reformulation of cultural identity.

In Chapter 3, I show how *Adivasi* is equated to indigeneity and deployed in the spheres of politics and activism by the Koyas of Telangana. Through a case study of Tudum Debba, an organisation that purports to fight for the rights of *Adivasis* in Telangana, I examined how their symbols and practices perpetuate this narrative of ‘*Adivasi* as indigeneity’ among the Koyas and other tribal communities in Telangana. In addition, though its activism, Tudum Debba functions as an active intermediary. In Chapter 3, I showed how ‘*Adivasi*’ is equated to indigeneity and deployed in the spheres of politics and activism by the Koyas of Telangana. Through a case study of Tudum Debba, an organisation that purported to fight for the rights of *Adivasis* in Telangana, I looked at how their symbols and practices perpetuates this narrative of ‘*Adivasi* as Indigeneity’ amongst the Koyas and other tribal communities in Telangana. Through its activism, Tudum Debba functioned as a key intermediary between the tribal communities and state institutions. This involves guiding tribal communities to better engage the state authorities, and equipping them with the skills, resources, language, and technical know-how to promote Indigenous rights and assert their identity. I presented a case study of Arjun, a Tudum Debba leader and his first foray into the realm of electoral politics. Here, Arjun deployed ‘*Adivasi*’ as a form of strategic positioning to garner support for his campaign. His experience as an activist gave him symbolic capital and he drew on a carefully crafted narrative of *Adivasi* community and life, as one beset by discrimination and dispossession at the hand of state actors. By combining this with his own credibility as an *Adivasi* activist and deep knowledge of the history and culture, alongside his rhetorical capabilities, Arjun portrayed himself as the most suitable candidate to address the concerns of the tribal communities in Telangana. Hence, from these case studies, I showed how ‘*Adivasi*’ is not merely a Hindi word for tribal communities in India. Rather, it functioned as a narrative that is equated to Indigeneity as a mark of authenticity that carried meanings associated with land rights. As such, it was also deployed to make their plight audible to both Koyas and state organisations.

In Chapter 4, I discussed the only official nomenclature for the tribal communities in India, Scheduled Tribe (ST), and how the Koyas deploy it as an asset to gain access to social mobility. I argued that the ST status shaped Koya identity via the intertwined processes of governmentality and recognition. I used ‘govern’ to illustrate how the ST status underpinned the interactions between the Indian state – in its multiple-heterogenous forms – and the Koyas.

This produced a narrative of Koya identity where the ST status was wielded by both the Indian state and the Koyas for their own ends. The process of governmentality was evident in how the Indian state wielded the ST status to exert its authority over the Koyas. As Foucault's original concept implies, governmentality is about the ways in which power is exercised and knowledge is produced and disseminated in society, with a particular focus on the ways in which individuals are governed and govern themselves. This is expressed in the policy of affirmative action (known as reservations in common parlance) which I discussed in detail. To be classified as an ST by the Indian state is critical for achieving access to social mobility. For the Koyas, the ST status is therefore essential for them to gain a foothold in state institutions and as an avenue for social mobility. As such, the ST status is an inextricable part of their identity – not in a narrativized fashion – but more as a strategic asset. In this respect, the governmentality involved how the state and Koyas engagement in the production of knowledge about the community through multiple channels: political and cultural.

Nevertheless, the Koyas were not the sole of authors of their narrative identity. As seen in the example of the Nehru Centennial Tribal Museum, the tropes of primitivism and backwardness, which despite their dubious past – from colonial to present time – continued to inform current criteria for ST status and shaped the Indian state's perceptions of tribal communities. These antiquated and demeaning categories reflected how tribal communities in India continue to be viewed through an infantilizing lens. However, this did not equate to the passive subjectification of the Koyas. In the latter half of the chapter, I discussed the petitioning of Ambedkar statues and portraits as a powerful symbolic act, an appeal to a figure who is seen as the champion of disadvantaged groups and to a judicial text that speaks of impartiality and equality. The Koyas therefore contested such categorisations and demonstrated an active approach in asserting their rights as STs. These petitions also served as a form of creative mobilisation and reflected the agency of the Koyas holding the state accountable for the recognition of their rights. Hence, in seeking to consolidate their ST status, the Koyas are engaged in an ongoing struggle that involves the crafting of a potent and meaningful framework for them to raise their concerns as a marginalised community of Telangana.

Finally, I delved into the *Adivasi-Lambada* rift to illustrate that the ST status can manifest a form of identity politics between tribal communities. As tribal communities compete for reservations and the scarce resources they afford in terms of employment, education opportunities and political representations, it is inevitable that disadvantaged communities seek to ensure they can gain access to these critical opportunities. As demonstrated in the *Adivasi-*

Lambada rift, the Koyas mounted a concerted campaign of what I call ‘gatekeeping’ to guarantee their classification as STs. In the process, they argued that other tribal groups engage in disingenuous tactics and should be excluded from reservation under the said category. Here, the Koyas cleverly employed a range of strategies such as pointing out the discrepancies in the inclusion of Lambadas into the ST list, accusing the Lambadas of taking up all the reservations, to further cement the ST status as an integral part of their identity.

In Chapter 5, I ask: ‘How do the Koyas of Kamaram articulate their religious identity?’ To address this question, I first explore the articulations of Koya religious identity through three Koya festivals: the Sammakka Saralamma Jatara, Remakka Relakka Jatara and Karukonda Sadalamma Panduga. By analysing these festivals, I raise the following points. First, these Koya festivals serve as sites of social memory and are an important conduit in preserving and expressing Koya religious identity in India today. Following this, I highlight how these three festivals differ from each other, and in so doing, draw out the different narratives that constitute Koya religious identity. As a corollary, I show that these Koya festivals serve as sites of contestation and appropriation. For instance, the biennial Sammakka Saralamma Jatara is an important festival for the Koyas. Coupled with the pervasive influence of Hinduism in the region, it has led to the notion that this *Jatara* is a Hindu festival and, the perception that the Koyas are Hindus. This is disputed by some Koyas as these festivals are key markers of Koya religion (or *Koya Punem*), and hence, they do not view themselves as adherents of Hinduism. This debate over whether Koya festivals are part of the Hindu fold lends itself to larger issues concerning the religious identity of the Koyas.

Rather than reducing the religious identity of the Koyas to Hinduism – however defined - I argued that the Koyas integrate the Hindu worldview in their everyday religiosity. They do so by engaging in a process of ‘mixing and matching’ (Sinha 2009) in an articulation of their religious identity. The Koyas of Kamaram did not discard their Koya Punem for Hindu festivals, nor do they viewed themselves as being ‘Sanskritized’ or emulating upper caste behaviour (Srinivas 1966). This rendition of Koya religious identity is one that accommodated a religiosity that allowed them to mix and match religious practices familiar to them and associated with *Koya Punem* and its local surroundings. At the same time, Hindu tradition have filtered through to local religious practices and ways that many have embraced. For instance, in puja worship of particular gods, aspects of the rituals, festivals, and symbolism are incorporated into their annual calendar. This articulation of Koya religious identity was a narrativized one, in terms of myths and expressed in symbols and rituals. It presented the

religious identity of the Koyas as one that drew on a dynamic range of religious practices and discourses which were open to contestations, appropriations, and change.

In my final chapter, I unpacked the term '*Vanavasi*' to illustrate how it represented a narrative of Koya identity that is underpinned by *Hindutva*: a form of Hindu ethno-nationalist ideology. Here the 'authors' of the narrative are *Hindutva* activists, who try and define Koyas under the rubric of *Vanavasi*, in their programme of assimilating the Koyas into the Hindu Rashtra. I examined the welfare projects of the Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad (VKP), a social welfare organisation for tribal communities in Telangana. I argued that the VKP went beyond being a welfare organisation. Rather, it should be viewed as far more capacious and utilitarian in nature, where welfare projects by the VKP served as conduits to propagate the stories and ideology of *Hindutva* amongst the Koyas and other tribal communities in India. Here, I used 'saffronising' in an ethnographic context to illustrate how the VKP propagated its own narrative on Indigenous identity in India, as one that is cultivated and refined in the mould of *Hindutva*. Furthermore, I showed that such cultivation featured a vital link that binds *Hindutva* and the notion of development or 'vikas', across the work of the VKP. VKP's project of integration is mediated through the notion of development and facilitated the re-defining of Koya identity as '*Vanavasi*'. Such ethno-nationalist ideologies, I suggest, manifested in non-coercive institutions and programs (as school and curricula), which in turn allowed for greater propagation and acceptance by Indigenous communities in India.

In this thesis, I have sought to examine the different narratives of Koya identity which are encapsulated within the ethnonyms that the Koyas deploy in their everyday lives, and as part of a wider cultural politics associated with disadvantaged groups across India (see Doron 2013; Jaoul 2006; Narayan 2001). I do not claim that these are the only narratives that the Koyas deploy, nor am I saying that these narratives are representative of all the Koyas in India. Identities are contingent on a myriad of factors and this thesis is a glimpse into how narratives of identities are constructed, expressed, and contested amongst the Koyas.

It is important to note the context in which these narratives are situated. The village where I spent most of my time in Kamaram is considered one of the more developed villages in rural Telangana in terms of infrastructure, and state sponsored institutions. It was therefore an excellent site from which to evaluate and examine how tribal communities interact everyday with the state as a heterogenous entity. The Koyas of Kamaram have access to more facilities and resources and considered to be more upwardly mobile as compared to the Koya

communities residing in the remote villages of Telangana. Further research is warranted on how the state is seen and encountered by those tribal communities living and working in more remote parts of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh (see Benbabaali 2022, 2018; Swamy and Rao 2018). Clearly, identities are also shaped and transformed by socioeconomic conditions, including exploitation and poverty, as much as by resistance to the state – conceived by some as oppressive, as Nandini Sundar (2019) has written in her acclaimed book, *The Burning Forest: India's War in Bastar*. My own contribution was a fine-grained look at a village and its people for whom accommodation and strategic engagement with the state was key to their everyday lives as much as investing meaning in their lifeworlds.

My thesis offers an ethnographic study into the varied narratives of identity amongst the Koyas of Kamaram. It is a recognition that Koya identity is never static and that ethnonyms can hold different meanings. The ethnonyms that they deploy are culturally meaningful and at times aimed at strategic ends. It is through unravelling each of these ethnonyms (*Koitur*, *Adivasis*, *ST*, *Vanavasi*) and their associated meanings and practices that Koya agency is revealed, largely through the contention, and appropriation, and re-definitions of these terms. Such terms also allow the Koyas to express their identity in dynamic ways, as a form of decolonisation, to strategically position themselves to gain advantages, to fuel their activism and hold the state accountable, and highlight meaningful pasts or religious sentiments. To be sure, tribals across India are by and large a disadvantaged group. Most continue to endure dispossession and exploitation, cast as ‘outsiders’, and excluded from state and religious patronage. Yet, as I have shown in this thesis, some groups, as the Koyas, are increasingly able to reconfigure their identities in creative and innovative ways that enable them to author their own political and social projects in productive and sophisticated ways.

Glossary

The glossary includes most of the non-English words used in this thesis and provides contextual meanings of the terms.

Aarti: A Hindu ceremony in which lights with wicks soaked in ghee are lit and offered to one or more deities

Adivasi: Hindi word for original inhabitants

Bharat Mata: The personification of India as a mother goddess. She is usually depicted as a woman dressed in a saffron sari holding the Indian national flag and accompanied by a lion

Bharatiya Janata Party: The current ruling political party in India under Narendra Modi, the incumbent Indian prime minister

Bhagwa Dhwaj: The symbol of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the form of a saffron-coloured flag

Bhajans: Hindu devotional songs

Boddurai: A place of worship in the centre of Koya villages; important meetings and discussions pertaining to village matters are often held there

Chai: An Indian hot beverage made by boiling black tea in milk and water with a mixture of aromatic herbs and spices.

Dalit: Means ‘oppressed’, ‘broken’ or ‘crushed’ to the extent of losing original identity. In legal and constitutional terms, Dalits are known in India as Scheduled Castes.

Dalu Gadda: A large red flag replete with Koya icons that represents the Koya clan god

Dharna: Hindi word for peaceful protest

Dhanka: A tribal community in Jaipur, India

Diwali: Hindu festival of lights

Ghar Wapsi: Hindi phrase meaning ‘returning home’, but in its deployment by *Hindutva* organisations, it refers to the religious conversion to Hinduism from Islam, Christianity and other religions

Gond: One of the largest tribal groups in central India

Gondwana, Gondwanaland: A historic region belonging to the Gonds in central India, comprising areas in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra

Gramavasi: Hindi word for village dwellers

Gurudakshina: The tradition of repaying one's guru after a period of guidance

Gumpu: Telugu word for village hamlet

Hindu Rashtra: Hindu ethnonationalist state

Hindutva: A modern political ideology that advocates for Hindu supremacy and seeks to transform India, constitutionally a secular state, into an ethno-religious nation known as the *Hindu Rashtra*

Idlis: A popular South Indian breakfast dish made from fermented rice flour

Jatara: Telugu word for festival

Jati: Hindi word for caste

Kabbadi: Known as the ‘game of the masses’ in India. It is a team game played between two sides of twelve players, though only seven are in the playing area at any one time. The individual raiding the defensive zone (raider) of the opposing team must touch a member of the opposing team holding a single breath, while chanting the word ‘kabaddi’. Points are scored when the raider makes it back to his zone without being captured by the opposing team

Karyalay: Hindi word for office

Karyavah: Secretary

Kedareswara Vratham: A ritual observance performed by devotees of Lord Shiva during Diwali

Komaram Bheem: A Koya hero who fought for tribal rights and led a rebellion against the Nizams of Hyderabad during the 1930s

Koya, Koitur: One of the largest tribal groups in Telangana, India

Koya Punem: Koya religion

Lambada: A former nomadic tribal group in India, also known as Banjaras and Sugalis in Telangana

Maria: A tribal group from the Bastar district of Chhattisgarh, India, who are related to the Gonds

Mallah: A boatmen community and a subcaste of the Nishads, located in Banaras, Uttar Pradesh

Munda: A tribal group in central India

Nagaravasi: Hindi word for city dwellers

Naxalite: A insurgent group that subscribes to Maoist ideology and is active in and around the Chhattisgarh–Odisha region and areas of Jharkhand, Bihar and West Bengal

Parha: A politico-sacral institution of the Mundas, a tribal community in India. It is comprised of a cluster of between five to twenty-one villages. Each cluster, or *parha*, was presided over by a male chief, a *parha raja*, who is responsible for preserving harmony and settling intra-village, or difficult inter-village, conflicts.

Pooja: Hindu word for worship

Panchayats: Village councils in India

Pracharak: A worker or volunteer for the RSS

Prathana: Hindi word for prayer

Rakhi: A talisman or amulet that symbolises love and duty between brother and sister, used during the festival of Raksha Bandan

Raksha Bandan: A popular Hindu festival celebrated in South Asia; on this day, sisters of all ages tie a *rakhi* around the wrists of their brothers to symbolise love and duty between brother and sister

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh: The largest Hindu ethno-nationalist organisation in India, which is known for its *Hindutva* ideology

Hindu Rashtra: Loosely translated to Hindu nation, but is deployed by the RSS to propagate their ideology of Hindu majoritarianism in India

Samaj: Hindi word for society

Sangh Parivar: Family of the Sangh, a term used to refer to the organisations that are affiliated to the RSS

Sanskriti: Sanskrit word for culture

Shakha: Sanskrit word for branch

Shaivite: The Hindu worship of Shiva as the main deity

Sarpanch: Hindi word for village chief

Slokas: Hindi word for Vedic hymns

Swayamsevak: An unpaid volunteer, commonly used to refer to those belonging to the RSS

Tilaka: A coloured spot or mark worn by Hindus on the forehead, often indicating membership of a religious sect or caste, or marital status (for women)

Telangana Ku Haritha Haram: A flagship programme of the Government of Telangana, India, aimed at increasing the green cover in the state of Telangana. The name ‘Haritha Haram’ translates to ‘Green Garland’ in English, and the program was launched in July 2015 by the Chief Minister of Telangana, K. Chandrashekar Rao

Tudum Debba: A tribal activist organisation in Telangana that focuses on issues pertaining to tribal rights

Vanavasi: Hindi word for forest dwellers

Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad: A social welfare organisation that is active amongst the Scheduled Tribes of India; it is part of the Sangh Parivar, the family of organisations affiliated with the RSS

Vikas: Hindi word for development

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