SOCIAL LIFE OF THE KOYAS IN TELUGU LAND:
SOME REFLECTIONS

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(Abstract)

The purpose of this research paper is to focus on the social life and practices of the Koya tribe in Telugu land. The Koyas are divided into endogamous sub-divisions. The Koya society is patrilineal one, where the male folk exercise dominance on the women. Interestingly, most of their festivals are associated with their agricultural operations. They celebrate Vijjupandum festival in honour of Earth Goddess and also Kothal Panduga (harvesting festival). Their Sammakka Jatara is most famous festival in the world. The social life of the Koyas is undergoing change due to modernization and globalization.

Introduction

India has the largest concentration of tribals next to Africa in the world. The Koyas are one of the numerically predominant tribal groups found living in East Godavari, West Godavari, Khammam and Warangal areas of Telugu land. The enchanting Koya tribal society constitutes the colourful component of the cultural heritage of Telugu land. The total population of Andhra Pradesh before division, as per the 2011 Census, is 8,45,80,777. Out of it, the ST population is 59.89 lakhs which constitutes 7% of the total population of the then Andhra Pradesh. As per 2001 Census the total ST population was 50,24,104 in Andhra Pradesh. Out of it the Koya tribe population was 5,68,019 [male – 2,83,106 & female – 2,84,913]. In 2011 Census the tribe-wise population of the then Andhra Pradesh is not codified.

Sub-sects of the Koyas

This tribe is divided into several functional endogamous groups which are divided into certain exogamous clans such as (1) Gutta Koya called as Racha Koya (mountain dwellers), (2) Kommu Koya (those who live on river banks), (3) Kammara Koya
(Blacksmith), (4) Mursari Koya (Brass worker), (5) Gampa Koya (Basket maker), (6) Oddi Koya (Priest), (7) Pattadi Koya (Beggar), (8) Doli Koya (Malas), (9) Kaka Koya (Kapu), (10) Matwa Koya (Golla), (11) Lingadhari Koya (Saivites). In modern days the distinction of these groups is disappearing and respective groups are not pursuing their traditional occupations.

Language of the Koyas

The Koyi (Koya) language is said to be a dialect of Gondi. Koyas living in Adilabad, Karimnagar, Warangal and some parts of East Godavari have forgotten their own Koya dialect and adopted Telugu as their mother tongue. The Koyas in Khammam district and West Godavari district speak Koya language. So linguistically the Koyas are divided into two main groups, those who speak Gondi dialect and those who speak Telugu. At present the primary education of this tribe is imparted in Koya language as Koya Bharati.

Child Birth

Koyas believe that pregnancy of a woman is the result of God's gift. When labour pain starts one of the aged women of the village, who knows the process of delivery attends her during that period. She cleans the baby and cuts the un-biblical cord and attends on her for the entire day. On 11th day, the mother and child are given bath with hot water and wear new clothes. The relatives and villagers are invited for this function. Ceremonial feast with sweets, mutton and liquor is arranged.

Name Giving Ceremony

The name giving function will take place either on 11th day or 21st day. The child is kept in a cradle. They tie the three leaves of Ippa Tree to a thread. Three times they with take it round the child then they remove the leaves and keep two in two hands and one beside him. They utter some names and to which name the child folds his hands, that name would be given to the child.

Puberty
Generally the girls attain puberty at an age of twelve to fifteen years. It is an intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood. During the period of 1st menstruation, the girl is asked to sit on Palm leave separately at the corner of the house and on eleventh day her body is smeared with turmeric paste and given ceremonial bath and allowed to lead normal life. New cloths are arranged for her. Community feast is arranged with non-vegetarian diet. Marriages take place after the girl attains puberty only and child marriages are rare.

Marriage

Koya marriage or Pendli is one of the important social functions without which a man has no place in the society. For Koyas, marriage is a necessity because they have to perpetuate their generations. Moreover, the wife is an indispensable partner in all sphere of their life. The cross cousin marriages are encouraged. Four types of acquiring spouses are in vogue among the Koyas i.e., marriage by negotiation, marriage by love and elopement, marriage by service and marriage by capture (poyithor). The marriage by negotiation is becoming more popular way of acquiring mates in modern times.

Marriages by Negotiations (Tallipitungator Pendli)

The marriages by negotiations are generally initiated by boy’s party and his family. He has to bear the entire expenditure of marriage. The bride’s parents need not spend much money for marriage celebrations. After coming to know about a particular girl, the parents of the boy accompanied by some of the village elders visit the house of the bride. The members of the party after arriving at the bride’s house greet the inmates and sit after washing the feet. Then through an introductory talk, the purpose of visit is slowly revealed by using a customary phrase, “Pappu Annam Thinataniki Vachachamu” (We came to eat food with dal) indicating that they came for marriage alliance.  

Parents of the girls first inform the boy’s party to contact the maternal uncle. The consent of maternal uncle is very important in settlement of marriage alliance. The parents of the bridge-groom accompanied by Patel, Pina Pedda and Pujari and some of the elders visit the house of the bride. The auspicious day for marriage is fixed by village
priest who officiates the marriage celebrations. During the marriage ceremony an elderly Koya woman keeps two wooden pestles (rice – pounders) near the neck of the bride and bridegroom.

The village priest shows the couple the Sun and inform them that Sun is witness to their marriage. Again one day before marriage the boys party go to the house of the girl with a goat, some measure of rice, new cloths to bride and her parents, bride price and some silver ornaments. A community feast is arranged with the provisions brought by boys party and both parties start to groom’s village during the night itself. As soon as the marriage party approach the village boundary, the boys party bring food, water and feed the girl’s party at the village boundary itself. The respective relatives carry the bride and groom on shoulders and bring to the marriage Pandal in front of the boys house. They are given ceremonial bath after smearing them with turmeric paste. The groom ties marriage badge and black beads in the neck of the bride.
Marriage by Capture (poyithor)

The second type of marriage prevalent among this community is marriage by capture. When a young man cannot afford to give wedding feast and pay the bride price, he generally resorts to this kind of marriage. An young man who wants to marry a particular girl informs about his desire to the elders and friends of his village. The boy’s party waits for the opportunity either at weekly market or in forest places and captures that particular girl.

Marriage by Love and Elopement (Eruvuru Istamasathoru)

When parents of the either of the party do not agree for proposed union, the boy and girl who determine to marry, elope to a distant place and return to village after few days or few months. After his return, he has to send bride price to wife’s parents. The parents of the girl arrange community dinner with the money sent by their son-in-law.

Marriage by Service

In case when a boy was not in a position to pay bride price, he would serve in the house of prospective father-in-law for two or three years or till stipulated period. After this period is over, the father-in-law celebrates the marriage. If he is not having male children, he keeps his son-in-law and daughter in his house; otherwise the son-in-law takes his wife and resides in his village.

Divorce

In Hindu society marriage is considered as the religious sacrament. So divorce is difficult. Divorce system prevails in the Koya society. Divorce is oral and conventional but it is not legal among the Koyas and it may be initiated from either side. But generally females do not reveal the desire of the divorce openly but show their resentment by liking other persons which ultimately leads to divorce his wife.

Dress and Ornaments

The Koya women wear a saree from waist to knee. Some women do not use a cloth to cover their breasts except when going outside. Now-a-days Koya women are
wearing sarees handloom and mill made. Koya woman decorated herself with various kinds of ornaments. Two types of anklets (beri) are found very common. One is circular and other is oval in shape. Anklets are made by aluminum and brass. They used glass and plastic bangles and they were very fond of bead necklace. Necklace of various sizes and colours like yellow, black, white and red are very much liked by them and purchased from local markets. Another kind of necklace is made up several small brass discs in the form of coin. Nose ornaments are used to the sides and at the septum of nose. The ornaments of various shapes and sizes cover the ears. Some ear ornaments are called as Karna Moggalu. Very few women are using golden ornaments.

**Food and Drink**

The staple food of the Koyas is Jowar. They make flour out of the Jowar and prepare *ganji* out of it. Since paddy is also widely cultivated, they take rice also frequently. As the produce from their field is not sufficient throughout the year, they gather edible roots and tubers from the forest in different seasons of the year and preserve them to supplement their food requirements. They generally eat roots and tubers like Tella Channa Gadda, Nalla Chenna Gadda, Vodagadda, etc. They also eat some flowers and leaves such as Ippa flower. An intoxicating drink is also extracted from the flowers. They extract oil also from the Ippa nuts and the oil is used both for cooking and lighting. They hunt wild animals with their bows and arrows and eat them. Fish is most delicious
item of food to Koyas. Koyas also abundantly take toddy from January to June months. Women folk and even children also take toddy during this season.

**Tattooing**

Though tattooing is essential feature of body decoration among Koyas, it is very commonly found among female members of the Koya society. They have tattooing like dot, lines, and some types of small flowers. Besides these casually get on their arms and forearms tattooed with designs of flowers, tree etc. Tattooing is done by iron needle, carbon and milk. When a girl is about 6 to 7 years old she is tattooed on various parts of her body.

**Festivals**

Most of the Koya festivals are associated with their agricultural operations. Koya women participate in Vijjupandum (seeds charming festival) or Bhudevi Panduga that is celebrated at the time of starting cultivation. It is celebrated in the month of Rohini Karthe or Mrugasira Karthe. The villagers take a pig and fowl in procession in the village by chanting the names of the Earth Goddess and Goddess of small pox Mutyalamma and sacrifice them in front of village deity. The blood is mixed with the seeds in bottle-gourds. The next day women folk put on swings to the trees and make merriment. The Koyas celebrate this festival for five days. Afterwards the Koya farmer consults his family priest called “Mala Dasu” about auspicious day for sowing of seeds in the fields. Kothal Panduga (harvesting festival) is another one celebrated by the Koyas. Interestingly, on each occasion of the harvest and before consuming it, Koyas celebrate festivals in various seasons like Pachcha Panduga, Kurman Panduga, Ippa Flower Panduga, Chikkudu Panduga, Mamidi Panduga, etc.

A significant festival of Koya community, which is nationally known is Medaram Jatara or Sammakka Saralamma Jatara. This festival is held in memory of Koya tribal queen Sammakka and her daughter Saralamma in Medaram village of Mulugu taluk of Warangal district. This non-Vedic and non-Brahmanical festival is celebrated once in two years on a large scale for four days in January-February. It is celebrated in Medaram, a part of Dandakaranya, during the time the goddesses of the tribals is believed to visit
them. Samakka fought against the medieval dynasty of the Kakatiyas who ruled Warangal from 1000-1323 A.D.⁷

People offer jaggery of a quantity equal to their weight to the goddesses and take holy bath in Jampanna Vagu (stream).

**Death Ceremony**

The dead are either buried or cremated. Neither bath is given to the corpse nor any decorations made. As soon as a member passes away, the message is sent to all the relatives. A cow is slaughtered and tail is kept in the hands of dead person. They believe that by doing so soul of dead can go to the heaven. After the burial a lamp is lit in the house where death occurred and everybody go inside the house and have a glimpse of lamp.

**Koya Dance (Permakok ata)**

Koyas perform a robust colourful dance called *(Permakok ata)* Bison Horn dance⁸ during festive and marriage ceremonies. The men put on Bison Horns on head and wear colourful dress. Koya dance is performed mainly by the Koya tribes of Orissa and Telugu land. Usually both boys and girls take part in this dance but the girls are more prominent. About 30 to 40 persons participate in the dance. The girls engage in beating
sticks on the ground, which are fitted with small bells. They form complicated zig-zag and unwinding circles and it is the most attractive part of the dance.

Conclusion

Basically the Koyas live in an isolated areas, who face many hardships pertaining to their socio-economic life, such as education, health, sanitation and food requirements. This is due to lack of awareness, poverty and illiteracy. However, the Koya society is changing in the wake of modernization and globalization. The dress pattern of the Koyas has changed completely in modern times. A change in hair style is observed among the Koya younger generation. The attitude of the Koya community is changing towards new pattern of houses. Infact, the process of acculturation is paving way for socio-cultural integration of Koyas with the main stream of society, but there is a danger of obliterating the rich socio-cultural heritage and institutions of positive values. So, they need to be safeguarded.


3. Oral Interview with Sodi Dulamma (Koya), Kalleru, Chintoor Mandal, Khammam District.


6. Oral Interview with Jayababu, ITDA, Bhadrachalam, Khammam District.
