

History, Culture, and Identity Crisis: An Ethnographic Study of Vadderas in Telangana State, India

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Abstract

India is a diverse country with populations exhibiting varied cultures that have undergone transitions over the years. One such community is that of Vadderas, also known as Odde/Waddars/Vaddirajulu in different dialects. They have many sub-groups such as Kallu Waddars, Mannu Waddars, Uppu Waddars, etc. Historically known as rulers of the erstwhile kingdoms, they shifted to being agriculturalists, then delved into stone-cutting and finally into taking up private jobs. In this paper, the authors etch an ethnographic description of the transitions this particular de-notified community has gone through in the last few years. Using a mixed-method approach to explore the changes, the paper highlights the various challenges this community is facing currently. Data was collected ethnographically from six residential sites of Vadderas using semi-structured schedules. Focussed Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted to elicit detailed responses. Traditionally, the Vadderas depended on stone-cutting and working with soil but due to transcendental changes related to poverty, geographical disparity, and socio-political dynamics, the community has not been able to cross the threshold of development. The next generation is discontinuing the traditional art of stone-cutting and is moving towards urban areas for private jobs, disassociating themselves from the traditional community-based occupation and related identity. The migration in want of better job prospects leads to multiple challenges such as discontinuing agriculture in their native place, children withdrawing from school, poor living conditions at construction sites leading to severe health hazards, and overall alienation from cultural identity. The paradigm shifts in their cultural ethos have also been one of the factors leading to drastic changes in their lifestyle patterns. The paper examines all these challenges in detail and sums up the current scenario wherein the Vadderas are yearning for a better quality of life, equity for the much-desired transformation, and enlisting as a Scheduled Tribe.

Keywords: Vadderas, De-notified Tribes, Stone-Cutting, Soil Digging, Identity Crisis

Introduction and Background of Vadderas

When passing through a metropolitan city or any other big city, the most obvious thing people observe is the big buildings. It might be a software organization, some industry, an apartment building, a government office, etc. A city might lose its charm without these structures. People might know the owner of those buildings but no one thinks about the workers who gave their blood and sweat in constructing those structures. In South India, especially in Hyderabad, the capital city of Telangana state, the

major share of those workers come from a community called Vadderas. Vadderas come under De-notified tribes. In the past, they were migratory in nature and offered their services in whichever place they stayed temporarily (Bokil, 2002).

Their main source of livelihood is stone-cutting and soil-digging. They were believed to be very skilled in what they did and were often seen in places where construction works such as canals, railways, reservoirs, harbors, and drainage works were taking place (Thurston & K, 1909). Both men and women share equal loads of work. The literature available before independence portrays them in a bad light and there are not many studies available on them after independence because of which not much information is available about this particular community.

They are believed to be rulers in the past (Siraj-ul-Hassan, 1920) and have lost their glory gradually with the passage of time. During the British reign, they were branded as criminal tribes and were placed in rehabilitation settlements (Malli & Kompalli, 2019). In later times, they started to settle down and adopted other livelihoods such as agriculture. However, most of them continued their community-based livelihood. The availability of modern heavy machines caused them to lose hold on their own community-based livelihood. Unable to cope with the changing times, due to illiteracy, societal exploitation, and discrimination they were forced to give up on what they knew and were skilled with and started to migrate again in search of livelihood.

Many scholars have studied identity and culture and have made significant contributions to the study of culture and identity crisis, providing critical insights into the ways in which cultural, political, and economic factors shape individual and collective identity. Anthony Giddens, a British sociologist, has written extensively on the topic of identity crisis and its relationship to modernity. According to Giddens, the modern experience is characterized by a sense of uncertainty and fragmentation, which has led to an identity crisis for individuals and societies. In his book “Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age” (1991), Giddens argues that the process of modernization and globalization has led to a loss of stability and coherence in traditional forms of self-identity and social structure. He further argues that this identity crisis is not limited to individuals but is also evident in the broader structures of society, such as the nation-state and other forms of collective identity. He suggests that the loss of stability and coherence in traditional forms of social structure has led to a crisis of meaning and fragmentation of collective identities. Drawing from Giddens’s approach, the authors examine the culture and identity crisis in Vadderas in today’s times.

Objective

In this paper, the authors attempt to explore the history and culture of the Vaddera community. They examine the challenges the Vadderas face and the identity crisis they go through in the state of Telangana.

Methodology

The data provided in this article is primary. The authors spent quality time on the field and collected the data. The time period of the data collected is from 2021-22. They have adopted the qualitative research method. The tools and techniques used for the data collection are observation which includes both participant and non-participant, in-depth interviews, information collected from the key informant, case studies, and focus group discussions. Apart from these, a semi-structured interview schedule is also carried to the field to collect household data. The secondary data added in the article is gathered from books, journals, reports, etc.

Study area

The researchers carried out the fieldwork in four mandals present in the districts of Nalgonda and Yadadri in the state of Telangana. The headquarters of the districts chosen are Nalgonda and Bhuvanagiri respectively. It takes more than three hours by bus from the state capital i.e., Hyderabad. The regions are semi-arid with scanty rainfall during the monsoon. The forest area is meager and most of the agricultural lands are being converted into plots for commercial purposes especially in the headquarters. Before 2016, Nalgonda is a big district in Telangana. After which it was partitioned into three including Nalgonda, Suryapet, and Yadadri Bhuvanagiri. Nalgonda has 31 blocks/mandals in it whereas Yadadri Bhuvanagiri has 16 blocks/mandals in it. Among them two mandals are chosen from Nalgonda and two from Yadadri Bhuvanagiri respectively.

Nalgonda and Yadadri Bhuvanagiri districts were chosen due to the availability of a significant number of Vadderas in them. From each block/mandal two villages were chosen and the field study was carried out. These villages are chosen since they lie near Hyderabad, the capital city of Telangana. The Vadderas are migratory and the authors found that the Vadderas of these villages frequently migrate to Hyderabad therefore have chosen these villages for their study.

S. No.	Name of the Block/Mandal	Name of the Village
1.	Athmakur	Katepalli, Kurella
2.	Chityala	Vurumodla, Nerada
3.	Ramannapeta	Sarnemgudem, Siripuram
4.	Valigonda	Jangareddipalli, Aroor

Table 1: Blocks/Mandals and villages visited for data collection

Table 1 gives information on the blocks/mandals chosen in the Nalgonda and Yadadri districts of Telangana state and along with it the villages selected in those blocks/mandals.

The data collected from the semi-structured schedule is stored in an Excel sheet and the data is analyzed using it. The data is as follows:

S. No.	Gender	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Females	120	40
2.	Males	180	60
3.	Total	300	100

Table 2: Frequency and percentage of females and males in the sample

Table 2 shows that out of the total sample (N) of 300 respondents, there were 120 females and 180 males.

Livelihood of Vadderas

Every community depends on a particular livelihood for their survival. Earlier the dependence was on natural resources, especially by the poor but due to the limited access provided to them the scenario is entirely changed (Farrington, D, C, & C, 1999 (June)).

The livelihood of Vadderas has changed drastically over the period of years and the percentage of people depending on their community-based occupation has declined. The Vadderas staying in the villages are migrating to the nearby cities in search of

jobs. The migrated Vadderas are indulging themselves in construction activities and leading a life by arranging temporary settlements in the place where they are engaged in the work. However, the Vadderas residing in the villages are concerned with various works along with their caste-based occupation.

Table 1: Livelihoods of Vadderas (Ethnographic Data from the Field)

The pie graph on the following page shows that 37.66% of the respondents still indulged in caste-based occupations i.e., Stone-cutting and Soil-digging which happens to be their caste-based occupation. 19.33% of the Vaddera population are involved in agricultural activities. These include those people who have their agricultural land, who rented the land of others, and who are working as the labor in other agricultural fields. 21.66% were working under the wage employment program of the government named Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Which happens to be an option for the elderly Vadderas. Apart from these, a smaller number of Vadderas are employed in the government sector, private sector, self-employed, in cottage and manufacturing units, and also as homemakers.

S.no	Main Occupation	Frequency	Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
1	Stone-making and Soil-digging	113	37.66	37.66
2	Agriculture (own land)	44	14.67	52.33
3	Agriculture (landless labour)	12	4	56.33
4	Agriculture (share cropping)	2	0.66	56.99
5	Government service	6	2	58.99
6	Private service	16	5.34	64.33
7	Self employed	18	6	70.33
8	Labour in Manufacturing unit or industry	8	2.66	72.99
9	Cottage industry	4	1.35	74.34
10	Home maker	12	4	78.34
11	MGNREGA	65	21.66	100
12	Total	300	100	100

N=300
Graph 1:
Depictin g the Various Occupat ions of Vaddera s
Cultura l Identity and Crises
Vaddera s were believed to be

residing in this land for a very long time. They are the ones who scripted on the rocks during the times of Ashoka, the Great (Rao, 2022). There are many legendary stories associated with them such as the Balanagamma story in the regions of Telangana, the story of Jasma Devi in the western region (Lashkar, 2013), and the Bagiratha story in the northern parts of India. Whatever might be the story, these folklores continue to exist in the community for generations. The ancestors made sure to pass on the

stories in the form of oral traditions. The Vadderas residing in the villages, especially the elder ones are well-versed in these legendary stories.

Vadderas caste is subdivided into many sub-castes and each sub-caste is named based on the material they are associated with. Originally the number of sub-castes is not known. At present nine sub-castes are identified and they are (1) Mannu Vadderas- the people who are associated with soil, (2) Kallu Vadderas-the ones associated with stone-making, (3)Uppu Vadderas- Vadderas involved in salt trading, (4) Girni Vadderas- the one who makes grinding stones, (5) Bandi Vadderas- people who use carts, (6) Oru Vadderas- they are the town-dwellers, (7) Tudugu Vadderas- these are the Vadderas who are branded as thieves, (8) Arugu Vadderas – the ones who sell Lac, and (9) Raja Vadderas- Vadderas who are employed by the Royal families (Nagalavi, 2019).

This kind of differentiation is not very much seen in the case of Vadderas present in Telangana. They are largely divided into Banda Vadderas, the ones involved in stone-making, and Matti Vadderas, people who are associated with soil digging. Every sub-caste claims themselves to be superior to the other. Earlier the Vadderas maintained marital alliances among their sub-castes itself but now, they are entering into marital alliances with every sub-caste of Vadderas. In the villages where the fieldwork was carried out the marital alliance is endogamous in nature. Even though the migrated Vadderas are residing outside the village and got settled there, they still search for a spouse in their village itself. This is a way to maintain contact with their villages and to stay connected to one's roots.

The Community Deity

Vadderas believe in the Eedhamma deity she is believed to be the most powerful goddess among the other village deities. Apart from Eedhamma, they are now offering their prayers to other village deities such as Yellamma and Uppamma who are associated with the other communities in the villages. The authors observed that the continuous association of Vadderas with the other communities in the villages made them assimilate their practices. Vadderas perform the festival of the deity once a year. Eedhamma festival is performed in the month of March and every Vaddera individual participates in the festival. The other deities' festivals are performed by individual households. Other communities in the village also participate in the festival and fulfill their roles. The performance of the festival depends on the availability of budget the community can afford. The individual households come together and pool up the money to celebrate the festival and the households who are unable to donate the money are made to contribute in the following year.

The authors observed that the festivals are not being performed on a regular basis like in the past since in the earlier times there was the availability of work for most time of the year and the Vadderas were engaged in caste-based occupation. The people of other communities invited Vadderas to work knowing about their skills but at present, due to the availability of crushers, cranes, tractors, etc., the Vadderas are being ignored. This heavy machinery is owned by the people who belong to higher castes. In this way, Vadderas are pushed away from their community-based occupation because of which they are unable to earn enough to celebrate the Eedhamma festival regularly.

Stone-Cutting and Well-Digging

Both Vaddera women and men equally work. The Vadderas who are still practicing their occupation own a medium-sized drilling machine with which they try to clear the huge rocks. They call it “Compression Bandi” which is worth more than one lakh and most of them buy it with the help of private finance companies and pay installments on a regular basis. The authors when questioned about the necessity of continuing their caste-based occupation with many hardships they replied that *“even though we are able to hardly earn from it these days it is our community-based occupation and we respect it and also this is the only job we are very skilled in doing.”*

Family and Kinship

Modernization had brought in so many changes in every society and Vadderas are not an exception. They have a nuclear family system in which the couple stays with their children. It is a patriarchal system in which the elder male member is the head of the family. The younger generation after their marriage mostly prefer to move out of their families and start their own family. The older generation lives on their own as they are getting financial support through the pension scheme given by the government on a monthly basis. They are supported by the public distribution service (PDS) of the government. Cross-cousin marriages are a common phenomenon among Vadderas in today’s time also.

Kinmen are present within the village or in the nearby villages. When there arises any conflict among themselves or with the other communities, the Kinmen are called to resolve it. Most of the conflict gets resolved within themselves and there are hardly any situations where the Police are asked to be involved. This kind of system can be witnessed in the villages.

Migration and related issues

Unfortunately due to the non-availability of opportunities in the villages for a better livelihood, the younger generations are leaving the villages and are migrating to the nearby cities. In the cities, they are getting hired in construction activities as a construction labor. They slowly are pulling their family members into the same profession and are getting settled in the urban slums with low facilities and unhygienic conditions. The folklore which are being carried out for generations are being slowly forgotten among the younger generations present in the cities due to the ceaseless brawl for livelihood. The struggle for survival on a daily basis and the discrimination towards them since they belong to a lower caste is still a continuous nightmare.

The necessity to hide their identity to avoid disgrace from the other communities is something that was observed by the researchers. The lack of education even after 75 years of independence is one more disturbing aspect among Vadderas (Anonymous, 2021). The sexual exploitation of Vaddera women near the construction sites far away from the cities is something which is not yet been discovered by the local media. The lack of governmental support for the development of this community is something that needs to be focused on. None of the organizations have worked for the upliftment of this community. There is no national leader hailing from this community who could work for their rights.

Policy Advocacy and Conclusion

The population of Vadderas in Telangana is in significant numbers still they are being ignored and are left out from enjoying the developmental fruits. The researchers suggest that the government should come up with a necessary policy for their overall development. Interventions that are specific to their community should be designed with keeping the culture-context in line. Flexible education and vocational training should be provided to pull the coming generation of Vadderas away from the depths of poverty and discrimination. The folklore and stories about their legendary heroes need to be documented so that they feel

confident about their community and find it necessary to pass them on to the next generations. They should be confident about their community's identity and not hide it. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) may come forward and align with the government for a good cause to uplift the Vadderas.

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