

TRACING THE EDIGA RACE IN INDIA: CULTURAL ROOTS AND EVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT:

Spiritually significant and culturally rich, India is home to several cultural groups. The Ediga is an indigenous community found in the Indian state of Karnataka. These communities have their own unique cultural history, way of life, heritage, and artistic traditions that have developed over time. It is known that the Edigas are descended from the Gowdas, and these descendants have spread into several groups with different names across the state of Karnataka. This paper is mainly based on the folk beliefs and cultural practices of the Ediga community in the state of Karnataka, India. The primary objective of this research paper is to explore the origin, history, culture, way of life, and traditional practices, as well as the social, cultural, economic, and political scenarios of the Ediga and its associated communities in the state of Karnataka. Anthropological methods such as observation, participant observation, and informal interviews have been employed to gain a deeper understanding of the Ediga community in India.

Keywords: Ediga (Idiga), Gowda, Billava, Sri Narayan Guru, Race, Toddy Tappers

INTRODUCTION:

India, with its sacred land and rich diversity, is a cradle for numerous cultural groups. It is an ancient nation with a variety of cultures, expressed through different tribes, communities, castes, and ethnic groups. Karnataka is home to a rich diversity of tribal groups, primarily living in the state's hilly and forested regions. These Ediga and its associated community groups are known for their distinct ways of life, customs, cultural practices, folk dances and songs, dietary habits, traditional medicine, and unique ways of celebrating festivals.

METHODOLOGY :

This research paper is mainly based on the folk beliefs and cultural practices of the Ediga community in the state of Karnataka, India. The research paper utilized secondary sources of information with a qualitative approach, and the required secondary data for the study were gathered from academic databases like ResearchGate, Google Scholar, and ShodhGanga, as well as newspaper articles and other relevant publications. The research employs traditional anthropological methodologies, such as holistic, ethnographic, comparative, and historical approaches, to know the various aspects of the Ediga community in India.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection included quasi-participant observation methods and unstructured, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, which provided detailed insights into the society of the Ediga community. Additionally, group discussions with elder community members were conducted to further enrich the understanding of their community holistically. The study used an ethnographic approach to study the community's life, including its origin, culture, migration patterns, social stratification, language, appearance, housing, lifecycle rituals, traditional occupations, livelihood strategies, food habits,

religious practices, socio-economic and political structures, social hierarchy, intercommunity relationships, etc.

The present research paper is structured as follows: The first part provides an overview of the Ediga race (Ediga associated sects) and its origins in the subcontinent of India. The second part elaborates on the Ediga and its associated communities in Karnataka, and the third part examines the religious, socio-cultural, economic, political, and educational aspects of the Ediga community.

ETHNO-HISTORY OF THE EDIGA COMMUNITY: AN OVERVIEW:

The Ediga (Idiga) community is one of the oldest communities in the Indian subcontinent. They are a Hindu toddy-tapper community found in the states of Karnataka, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu (Report of the Backward Classes Commission, Tamil Nadu, 1970: 1975). The traditional occupation of this community has been toddy tapping (Natraj, V. K., 2007). In Karnataka, they are primarily concentrated in the Malenadu and Shivamogga districts. The community is known by different names in various regions, such as Billava in coastal Karnataka and Eedigas in the rest of southern Karnataka. Similar, but culturally distinct, toddy-tapping communities, such as the Billava and Deevuru, exist in Dakshina Kannada and Southern Karnataka.

According to the elders of the community, the Edigas are considered one of the oldest races on earth. The word "Idiga" is an etymologically significant term derived from the Telugu word "Idchu," which literally means "to draw." The community has two main subdivisions: Dandu Idiga and Balija Idiga. They are found in various districts of Karnataka state, including Udupi, Dakshina Kannada, Bengaluru, Mandya, Mysuru, Chamarajanagar, Koppal, Shivamogga, Raichur, Ballari, and Vijayanagara, among others (Edgar & Rangachari, 1909).

According to available records, there are currently 26 Ediga (Idiga) and their associated communities in Karnataka and other states, each with diverse names based on geographical settings. These include communities in the states of Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana, such as Ediga, Eeliga, Iliga, Ilava, Billava, Malayali Billava, Deevuru, Deevuru Makallu, Namadhari, Kalala Gond, Gound, Thias, Tiiyan, Nadar, Deevuru, Bandhaari, Belledha, Pujari, Prajari, Halikshatriya, Deshbhandari, Devara, Eliga, Gaamalla, Helepaikaru, Halepaik, Illaavan, Thiyaan, Thyya, Tiiyan, Thiayan, Gamallas, Goundlas (coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh), and Settibalijas, Goundlas (East and West Godavari districts) respectively. These associated communities vary greatly in geography, culture, way of life, traditional practices, language, customs, and norms, with each having its own culture, rituals, and traditions (Edgar & Rangachari, 1909, and Karnataka Rajya Ediga Nowkarara Kshemabhivrudhi Sangha, 2024).

In Kerala, there are several coconut toddy-tapper communities, including the Ezhava and Thiyya. The Nadar caste is a toddy-tapping group from Tamil Nadu, while the Bhandari community is a toddy-tapping group from the Konkan region. Additionally, the Siyal community in Odisha is known for its involvement in toddy tapping (Edgar & Rangachari, 1909). The community members speak Kannada, Telugu, Konkani, Tamil, and Malayalam, regardless of where they are residing.

COMMUNITY ORIGIN IN INDIA: MYTHOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND MYTHOLOGICAL CONTEXT: AT A GLANCE:

The Ediga community's origin is deeply rooted in mythological beliefs, which, though not supported by scientific evidence, form an integral part of their legendary background. The Edigas take great pride in their rich heritage. The community is Hindu and worships nature, deities, folk gods, saints, philosophers, and notable figures from different generations, seeking blessings for prosperity in their families,

livestock, agriculture, health, and well-being Historically, they have been associated with palm toddy tapping and the liquor business as their traditional occupations.

Mythologically, the community claims descent from the sage Veda Vyasa, the compiler of the Mahabharata. The origin and history of the Ediga communities can be traced back to mythological Hindu scriptures such as the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Shivapurana, Skandapurana, and Matsyapurana. The mythological and historical significance of the Edigas (Gowda descendants) is mentioned during the reigns of Chandragupta Chakraborty, Adi Shankaracharya, Prataparudra, Jagajyoti Basaveshwara, and the Vijayanagara Empire (Karnataka Rajya Ediga Nowkarara Kshemabhivrudhi Sangha, 2024).

The Ediga-associated community groups trace their origin to the influence of Atri Maharshi's Gauda Mantra, believed to have played a role in their creation. As a result, these communities are known by various names, such as Gaudas, Goulas, and Eedigas across India. Varunidevi (also called Sure), the daughter of Varuna, is considered the family deity of the Edigas. According to legend, Atri Maharshi created the revered sage Kaundinya through the Gauda Mantra. Kaundinya Maharshi, with the blessings of his father, performed penance and brought forth fruit-bearing trees and herbs. From these, he extracted Somarasa, a sweet, mellifluous juice, which he used to cure human ailments. According to Karnataka Rajya Ediga Nowkarara Kshemabhivrudhi Sangha (2024), this act made Kaundinya Maharshi the founder of the Ediga (Gowda) lineage and the Kaundinya Gotra, which is linked to this race.

In addition to this, Kaundinya Maharshi pleased Shiva (Parameshwara) through his penance and received the boon to create the Kalpa tree. This tree, when consumed, granted immortality, ensuring that those who partook in its nectar (rasapana) would not be reborn. Madhu Karman, born from the left foot of Adirudra, is also recognized as the original ancestor of the Ediga family in the 'Rudrabharata.' As per this text, Madhu Karman is considered a key figure in the Ediga lineage and is defined as the progenitor of the community on this earth.

According to another mythological story, Parvati and Shiva (Parameshwara) descended to the world for a vacation. On a full moon day in the month of Vaishakh, Parvati became thirsty, but there were no water sources around. At that moment, a group of elegantly grown palm trees appeared. Parvati asked Shiva to help her quench her thirst with the sap from the trees. Just then, a Balegara Banajiga was passing by. Seeing him, Parameshwara said, "O lord, my wife is thirsty and very tired. There is a tree trunk here; gently split it, and bring the juice that flows from it to quench her thirst." He assured the man that merit would be gained for his help and handed him a small sharp tool. The Balegara collected the juice from the trunk and offered it to Parvati with devotion. Both Parameshwara and Parvati drank the juice and were satisfied. Later, Parameshwara told the Balegara, "Continue with this occupation, and you and your descendants will prosper." Thus, the lineage of the Ediga community is believed to have begun.

Another legend, mentioned in the book Brahmanotpatti Marthanda, describes how Janamejayarayan invited Vateswara Muni and performed a Yajna. After the Yajna, Vateswara Muni donated one village to each of his 1888 disciples, who then settled in Aryavarta. It is believed that these disciples became the Adigowdas, the original ancestors of the Gauda dynasty. Additionally, some Puranas suggest that the Edigas were originally Brahmins but were ostracized by other Brahmins due to their irreligious practices.

According to the Katamagaudane Kulguru story, Gopavaswa and Kalyani, descendants of Kaundinya Muni, had a son named Gopalagowda. Gopalagowda married a maiden named Veeramambe, and their son was Katama Gowda. Katama Gowda, a devotee of Shiva, was a donor and a taponiratha (one who practices austerity). He became the Guru of the Gaudavam in Kali Yuga, known as Sivatatvasara – Shivanandeeswara Dialogue. He was also referred to as Kanthamaya, Katamaya, Katamagowda, and Katamaheshwara. Gopalagowda, the king of Vidarbha and a devoted Shiva follower, ruled for many

years, sacrificed his family in his old age, and went to the Himalayas to perform penance for salvation. Katama Gowda succeeded him to the throne. With his power and austerity, Katama Gowda made trees like palm trees, known as Kalpa trees in Kali Yuga, bend down to the ground by themselves, allowing people to extract sap and engage in trade (Karnataka Rajya Ediga Nowkarara Kshemabhivrudhi Sangha, 2024).

Katama Gowda also brought a Shivlinga from the Himalayas to honor Kaundinya Maharishi, the progenitor of his clan, and placed it in Muktapura (now in Ananthapura district). He built a temple with 18 enclosures and established an ashram called Kaundinyashram. Katama Gowda later stayed at the ashram, where he wrote works such as Katama Maheswara, Katama Risishwara, Shivalila Mahatme, and Shivatattvasara. In his old age, he left 3000 disciples at the ashram, handed the responsibility of the kingdom to his relative Veer Bhojan, and went to the Himalayas for salvation. His era is considered by some scriptures to mark the beginning of Kali Yuga, following the Mahabharata war (Karnataka Rajya Ediga Nowkarara Kshemabhivrudhi Sangha, 2024).

In the different Yugas, the Ediga community has been known by various names: Deva Gowda in Krita Yuga, Adi Gowda in Treta Yuga, Shiva Gowda in Dwapara Yuga, and Satya Gowda in Kali Yuga. Another legend holds that when Adi Shankaracharya entered Mandanamishra's house, he was taught the Gauda Mantra by an Ediga.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: AT A GLANCE:

When dating back to the history of the community, it is recorded that Narayana Gowda, Sankara Gowda, and Vinayaka Gowda were entrusted with the systematic responsibility of collecting and selling liquor during the Chandragupta era. These three individuals were among the most influential and wealthy men in Chandragupta's kingdom, known for their integrity and courage.

Additionally, it is known that the great King Srikrishna Devaraya of the Vijayanagara Empire granted an inam (Umbali) to a village called Halepaika. During the reign of Praudha Devaraya, a division of Edigaras was created in the state's army, known as the Dandu Edigars. These Edigars travelled with the army during wartime, supplying liquor to the troops when stationed in central positions. When necessary, they also fought alongside other soldiers on the battlefield to protect their kingdom from invaders and enemies. Many members of this community also served in front-line positions in the Vijayanagara army.

Further, during the 12th century, in the time of Jagajyoti Basaveshwara (Basavanna), a monk named Marayya (Hendada Marayya), who was a close associate of Lord Basaveshwara, taught Shiva Tattva, Shivleela, Shivayoga, and Shivanubhavas as part of the Shiva Sharan tradition (Lingayat tradition). Only authentic sources mention his contributions during that time.

Sarvai Papanna, an indigenous member of the Belagavi community, organised a group of Ediga youths, studied martial arts and bodybuilding, and launched an attack against the Muslim state. He became known as Sardar Paparey and is considered an unsung hero in Indian history.

In 1628, the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb brought several Ediga leaders from Andhra Pradesh to his court. He learnt from them the classical methods of making different types of liquor and encouraged the manufacturing of high-quality liquor in his state. Edigas, Halepaikas, Billavas, Namadharis, Devars, and other groups up to the 12th century exhibited qualities of Chaturvarna, including Brahminism, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras.

SOCIAL STATUS IN THE SOCIETY: FROM FAST TO PRESENT AN AWARENESS EFFORT:

In 1854, Narayana Guru was born into an Ilava family in Chempajanthi village in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. His social reforms, based on spirituality, marked the beginning of the prosperity of the Billava

community. In 1904, the Guru laid the foundation stone for a temple at Kudroli in Mangalore, specifically for those who did not have access to other temples, including the Ediga, Billava, Namdhari, and other groups. The temple, completed in 1912, became the first in Karnataka with open access for untouchables. It is now known as the Kudroli Sri Gokarnanatheshwar Temple.

In 1904, the social organisation began to take shape on the coast, and by around 1910, similar efforts emerged in Bellary, in the northern part of Karnataka. A college was established in 1914 under the leadership of Rao Saheba Kanekal Nettakallappa for the benefit of caste students. In 1927, under the leadership of P. N. Gowda, the Karnataka Andhra Eediga Conference was held, marking the start of organisational work for the community. In 1944-45, K. N. Guruswami led the effort to organise the Edigas in Bangalore, which included the establishment of a student hostel in Chikkavalli, Bangalore.

Mr. K. N. Guruswamy, alongside Mr. K. Venkataswamy from Chikkajogihalli, who later settled in Arasekere, helped establish a student hostel at Seshadripuram in Bangalore. On November 9 and 10, 1958, a large conference of Edigas was held in Bangalore, inaugurated by the then ruler, Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar. This conference declared that all 26 Ediga sects, which were known as Ediga, Billava, Namdhari, Deeva, and Eeliga, are equal, and the Ediga Sangh would serve as the central organisation for all these groups across the country. The Ediga Sangh was later renamed the Mysore Region Arya Ediga Sangh. In 1961, another conference held in Mysore featured Shri Narayan Guru's disciple and the then Chief Minister of Kerala, R. Sankaran, as a guest. In 1995, the third general meeting of the society was held under the leadership of H.R. Basavaraju at the Bangalore Palace premises.

SOCIAL, ECONOMICAL, POLITICAL, AND EDUCATIONAL STATUS

The Ediga and its associated communities are one of the major communities in the state of Karnataka in terms of population, political participation, power politics, and socioeconomic and educational contribution. The Idiga community was categorised as an Other Backward Class in the 1980s, at which time they constituted around 2.5 percent of Karnataka's population (Census Report of India, 1981 and 2011). Also in Karnataka state, the community is classified under the reservation category Other Backward Classes for availing government facilities. Their socioeconomic status is influenced by various factors, with occupation playing a significant role.

The community also engaged in various occupations, including agriculture, farming labourers, wage labour, factory work, education, police, soldiers, security personnel, and traders. However, many members of the community have since diversified into fields such as literature, sports, entrepreneurship, theatre, film, business, and politics.

Through field observations, it has been found that the Ediga-associated sects settle in different types of housing, depending on their socioeconomic circumstances. These include pucca houses, semi-pucca houses, kachchh houses, and makeshift homes. Traditionally, the Ediga community's occupation was toddy tapping, a job considered to be of low status. Their socioeconomic status is influenced by various factors, with occupation playing a significant role. When it comes to dietary habits, roti, chapati, rice, dal, eggs, chicken, mutton, and fish are their staple foods. They prefer both vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods. Occasionally, elder members of the community consume liquor and smoke tobacco in some parts.

A significant number of Idigas have become wealthy and powerful by expanding their involvement in toddy tapping to include excise contracting, distilling, and brewing for large businesses. However, the economic base of the community remains largely centred on the liquor industry. The Idigas of the Neeravari Pradesh (irrigation lands) in Karnataka state own large amounts of fertile land, which provides them with a significant source of income (Damodaran, 2008).

The prominent and powerful politicians like Sarekoppa Bangarappa, Kagodu Timmappa, and B.K. Hariprasad, all of whom belong to the toddy-tapping community, have been able to garner support from these prosperous individuals (Osella, F; Osella, C, 2000). Additionally, a few members of the community practice ethnomedicine, also known as traditional or "naati oushadi" medicine, especially for treatments of the orthopaedic (bone-setting) ailments (Unnikrishnan; Kumar; Shankar, 2012).

Various attempts to unify these Ediga communities politically were made but largely faded by the 1980s (Mathew, George, 1984). Despite their relatively small numbers, eleven Idiga community people were elected as members of the Legislative Assembly in the 1985 elections, making them the largest single OBC group in the Karnataka Legislative Assembly. The community had six members in 1978 and eight in 1983 (Natraj, V. K., 2007). They continue to be a significant political force and were described as part of the AHINDA bloc, which played a crucial role in helping the Indian National Congress party win the 2013 Assembly elections (Patagundi and Desai, 2015).

In order to prepare graduate community members for various competitive exams, the Karnataka Rajya Ediga Noukarara Kshemabhivruddhi Sangha has organized a variety of educational and vocational training programs. They also hold job fairs for their community members based on their educational attainment in Karnataka. The government is implementing mandatory education initiatives to raise awareness about family management issues in low-income populations and creating additional government-funded postsecondary opportunities through internal reservations. There had been attempts to unite these various communities, of which the Deeveru are considered to be socially the lowest-ranked, to cohere politically, but these attempts petered out by the 1980s (Kavyashri and Gangadhar, 2022).

They are also organizing training programs and workshops in painting, dance, music, literary acting, fine arts, sculpture, handicrafts, and other such arts. Furthermore, they promote mutual harmony and well-being in families and mental health by organizing friendly sporting events, cultural events, social events, environmental protection activities, collective outings, and yatras. Additionally, they organize cultural and religious programs and workshops for the upliftment of the Ediga society. They research the eternal culture of the Ediga race and write treatises about notable leaders of the race who have made significant contributions to their society by publishing books and news articles.

CONCLUSION:

Ediga and its associated sects have their own unique cultural history, way of life, heritage, and artistic traditions that have developed over time. The history and mythology of the community suggest that they are of Gowda Vamshasta origin, and the community now has a presence across the world under different names. There are more than 26 sub-sects in the Ediga community, each with diverse languages, cultures, and traditions in Karnataka alone. However, they share a common occupation and are estimated to be in fourth place in terms of their population. Shri Narayana Guru, a prominent member and social reformer of the Ediga community, fought against the rigid Indian caste system and built temples for backward communities in the regions he traveled to, spreading awareness and promoting equality among the communities. The government of Karnataka has included these Ediga-associated communities in the reservation category of other backward classes, allowing them to benefit from government schemes and programs aimed at community upliftment.

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