

RESEARCH ARTICLE

CULTURAL HERITAGE, LIVELIHOOD, AND SOCIAL ORGANISATION AMONG THE KONDAREDDIES OF THE GODAVARI BASIN: A POLITICAL ECOLOGY AND CULTURAL RESILIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Sebin Michael¹

¹Research Scholar, Department of History, University College, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India.

Abstract: The *Kondareddies*, recognized as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) by the Government of India, represent one of the most ancient indigenous communities in Peninsular India. Residing in the forested highlands and river basins of the Godavari region, predominantly within Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, the *Kondareddies* have maintained a cohesive cultural identity despite centuries of marginalisation, colonial disruption, and post-independence development pressures. Although there has been sustained scholarly interest in the tribal communities of peninsular India, the *Kondareddies* remain underrepresented in comprehensive anthropological literature, particularly concerning the interrelationship between their cultural heritage, livelihood strategies, and social dynamics. This study seeks to address this gap through a descriptive and analytical account grounded in field observations conducted in *Kondareddies* settlements in the Godavari Basin, alongside a critical synthesis of ethnographic monographs, government records, peer-reviewed scholarship and documentary journalism. This study examines *podu* cultivation as an ecologically calibrated livelihood system, the traditional panchayat governance structure, marriage customs and kinship organisation, nature-based ritual festivals, the distinctive *bhunga*-style circular architecture of Gillaram village, and the system of gendered taboos that structure community life. A dedicated discussion section interprets these findings through the theoretical lens of cultural resilience and political ecological theory. The study concludes with a critical assessment of the current developmental scenario and advocates for participatory and culturally sensitive policy approaches to the welfare of PVTGs.

Keywords: *Kondareddies, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group, Podu Cultivation, Cultural Resilience, Godavari Basin.*

Article Received: 09 July 2026

Revised: 20 July 2026

Accepted: 24 July 2026

INTRODUCTION

India's civilizational richness is inseparable from the extraordinary diversity of its tribal cultures, which have sustained distinct and internally coherent ways of life for centuries. With over 700 scheduled tribal communities distributed across its diverse ecological and geographical zones, India represents a complex mosaic of indigenous knowledge systems, social organisations, and cultural expressions (Office of the Registrar General of India, 2011).

Among these communities, the *Kondareddies* occupy a position of particular scholarly interest, not only because of their considerable antiquity as a group but also because of the remarkable persistence with which they have maintained their cultural

heritage under conditions of long-standing socio-economic adversity and external pressure.

The *Kondareddies*, referred to variously in the literature as *Konda Reddis*, *Hill Reddis*, or *Konda Kapus*, are primarily distributed across the forested tracts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, with smaller populations documented in Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Maharashtra and Karnataka. Their traditional territory is organised around the Godavari River Basin, which has historically served as both the geographical and cultural axis of their communal life (Rao, 1988). The Government of India has accorded them the status of a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group, formally acknowledging their

declining population trajectory, pre-industrial technological base, conditions of extreme economic backwardness, and severely limited access to literacy and health infrastructure (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2013).

The Kondareddies are widely regarded as one of the oldest tribal groups in South India, distinguished by the tenacity with which they have preserved their cultural practices across generations and their continued employment of customary methods as part of their subsistence in the forest environment (Von Furer-Haimendorf, 1982). Despite certain regional variations in practice, the core cultural structure of the community across different states remains substantially unified and is organised around shared ecological knowledge, ritual observances, kinship norms, and traditional governance.

This study focuses on the culture, livelihood, social structure, traditional techniques, and contemporary conditions of Kondareddies. This study seeks to contribute to the growing body of anthropological literature on PVTGs in peninsular India and furnish an empirical foundation for culturally informed policymaking.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Following a review of the existing scholarship, it outlines the research problem, objectives, methodology, and theoretical framework. The substantive findings are organised into four thematic sections covering culture and livelihood, social structure, material culture, and contemporary conditions. The dedicated discussion section interprets the findings through the analytical frameworks of cultural resilience and political ecology before the paper draws its conclusions.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The scholarly literature on the Kondareddies and related tribal communities of peninsular India, while not extensive, provides a valuable foundation for an integrated study of their social organisation, livelihood systems, and cultural practices.

Von Furer-Haimendorf's (1982) seminal work, *Tribes of India: The Struggle for Survival* remains indispensable to serious enquiry into Indian tribal communities. In his treatment of the Kondareddies, Von

Furer-Haimendorf draws a crucial sociological distinction between the Konda Reddis and the dominant Hindu Reddy caste, cautioning against conflating two groups whose social positions and cultural identities are fundamentally different. His analytical framework, which examines tribal social organisation through the lenses of land ownership, ritual solidarity and customary governance, provides a productive theoretical foundation for the present study.

Rao's (1988) *Tribal Profile of Andhra Pradesh*, published by the Tribal Cultural Research and Training Institute, Hyderabad, furnishes demographic and geographical data on the Kondareddies, noting their distribution along both banks of the Godavari River from the Bhadrachalam area of Khammam district to the Devipatnam and Polavaram areas of East and West Godavari districts. He also draws attention to the practice of certain plain Kapus strategically adopting the Konda Kapu designation to access reservation benefits, a phenomenon that complicates accurate demographic enumeration of the Konda Kapus.

Thirupalu and Venkatasrarlu (2013), writing in *Global Research Analysis*, offer a sociological account of the community's governance system, kinship structure, and relationship with natural resources. Their treatment of the panchayat institution presided over by the hereditary peddakapu and the patrilineal kinship system governing family formation and marriage is particularly relevant to the social organisation dimension of this study.

Dhangaru (2014), presenting at the Indian History Congress, offers a historical and political economy perspective on *podu* cultivation in this region. By situating the practice within the colonial legal framework that sought to restrict and criminalise shifting cultivation, Dhangaru demonstrates how state policy has historically compounded the vulnerability of tribal communities dependent on Indigenous agricultural systems. This historical analysis is essential for interpreting *podu* cultivation as a form of cultural and economic change.

Krishna Reddy and Kutumba Rao's (1972) government report, *A Report of Economic Classification and Development Priorities of Konda Reddis of Polavaram*, provides

ground-level documentation of the community's economic activities, festival practices, and customary law, including a detailed account of the marriage system that informs the ethnographic discussion in the present paper.

Singh's (1994) *People of India* project, undertaken by the Anthropological Survey of India, provides an indispensable comparative ethnographic baseline, situating the Kondareddies within the broader landscape of peninsular tribal diversity. Elwin's (1964) *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin* and his documentation of tribal oral traditions across peninsular India (Elwin, 1954) remain foundational to the anthropological study of forest-dwelling communities, and his insistence on understanding tribal communities in their own cultural terms retains full methodological relevance for contemporary PVTG scholarship.

Padel's (2010) *Sacrificing People: Invasions of a Tribal Landscape* provides a searching critical examination of the structural forces, from colonial intrusion to post-independence developmental displacement, that have progressively eroded the territorial and cultural foundations of tribal communities. His analysis of the relationship between forest rights, resource extraction, and Indigenous dispossession is directly relevant to the Kondareddies context and the political ecology framework employed in this study.

Contemporary journalistic documentation has also contributed meaningfully to the understanding of the Kondareddies. Naidu (2023) documents the system of gendered taboos surrounding marriage ceremonies, particularly the prohibition on women crossing the Godavari River before a wedding. A subsequent report (Naidu, 2024) provides a vivid portrayal of the community's enduring traditional lifestyle in the Jaladam Valley. A report in *The Hindu* (Staff Reporter, 2022) documenting the replacement of the customary menstrual isolation structure by a guest house in certain settlements captures a significant moment of negotiation between customary practice and contemporary change in rural India.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Despite their recognition as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group and their

significance for anthropological scholarship, the Kondareddies remain inadequately examined as a community. Scattered accounts exist pertaining to specific aspects of their social life, but there is a notable absence of integrated scholarship examining the relationship between cultural heritage, livelihood strategies, and social dynamics in a sustained and holistic manner (Xaxa, 1999).

Simultaneously, the community faces a convergence of structural challenges, including persistently low literacy rates, inadequate access to healthcare, ongoing deforestation, and displacement pressures, all of which threaten the continuity of their cultural practices and traditional knowledge systems (Padel, 2010). Government welfare programs, though formulated with the declared aim of improving conditions for PVTGs, have demonstrated limited effectiveness in bringing about tangible changes in the lives (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013). This gap between policy intent and practical outcomes warrants systematic scholarly attention.

Against this background, the present study addresses the following central research problem: In what ways do the Kondareddies sustain and reproduce their cultural heritage and social organisation in the face of contemporary pressures? What does an integrated examination of their traditions, governance arrangements, livelihood practices, and material culture reveal about their identity and capacity for cultural resilience?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine the cultural practices, festivals, oral traditions, and belief systems of the Kondareddies and assess how these contribute to the preservation of collective identity across generations.
- To analyse the social organisation of the Kondareddies, including their kinship system, marriage practices, panchayat governance, and mechanisms for the resolution of disputes.
- To document the traditional livelihood strategies of the Kondareddies, with particular attention to *podu* cultivation, forest resource use and artisanal production.

- To describe the distinctive material culture of the Kondareddies, with special reference to the *bhunga*-style circular architecture of the Gillaram village.
- To assess the contemporary developmental scenario of the Kondareddies, including indicators of literacy and health, and the practical impact of government welfare schemes.
- To interpret the findings through the analytical frameworks of cultural resilience and political ecology, contributing to the wider academic discourse on Indigenous cultural preservation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is primarily descriptive and analytical, situated within the interpretive tradition of social and cultural anthropology. It employs a qualitative research framework that gives precedence to thick description, careful contextualisation, and the critical synthesis of evidence drawn from two distinct data streams: primary field observations and systematic secondary research.

Field Observations. The researcher undertook a field visit to Kondareddies settlements in the Godavari Basin region during January 2025, focusing on villages in the East Godavari and West Godavari districts of Andhra Pradesh, including Gillaram village. The field visits were observational and informal, involving no structured questionnaires or formal interview protocols.

The researcher directly observed habitation patterns, architectural forms, agricultural activities, material culture, and aspects of daily community life. Informal interactions were held with community members, village elders, and local residents. These conversations were exploratory and non-directive, allowing participants to guide the substance of the discussion. Field notes were maintained throughout the study and formed part of the documentary record.

The researcher's positionality as an academic outsider from Thiruvananthapuram was acknowledged throughout, and care was taken not to impose analytical frameworks that would distort the community's own self-presentation.

Distinction between Primary Observations and Secondary Sources.

Throughout the substantive sections of this paper, a clear distinction is maintained between what was directly observed or communicated during fieldwork and what is drawn from secondary literature. Phrases such as 'field observations revealed,' 'the researcher observed', or 'as noted during fieldwork' signal primary material, while standard parenthetical citations indicate reliance on secondary sources. This distinction is essential for the epistemological transparency of the study and directly addresses methodological concerns regarding the integration of primary and secondary data.

Secondary Research. The secondary research component draws upon published scholarly monographs, government reports, institutional documentation, peer-reviewed research articles and documentary journalism. Key texts include the works of Von Furer-Haimendorf (1982), Rao (1988), Thirupalu and Venkatasrarlu (2013), Dhangaru (2014), Krishna Reddy and Kutumba Rao (1972), Singh (1994), and Elwin (1964), among others.

This combination of field observation and secondary synthesis is consistent with the established practice of descriptive tribal studies in Indian anthropology, in which the scholarly record accumulated by earlier researchers forms the analytical foundation, and field visits serve to ground and verify observations derived from secondary sources.

Analytical Method. Evidence drawn from both data streams was organised thematically and subjected to comparative and interpretive analyses. The analytical method is broadly inductive in nature. The study attends, where possible, to the emic dimension of Kondareddies lives, drawing upon accounts that reflect the community's own nomenclature, categories of practice, and self-understanding as preserved in the ethnographic record (Elwin, 1964). A dedicated discussion section applies the theoretical frameworks of cultural resilience (Holling, 1973; Turner *et. al.*, 2003) and political ecology (Peet & Watts, 1996) to the interpreted findings.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by two principal theoretical perspectives drawn from environmental anthropology and tribal studies. The first is cultural resilience, which in the anthropological literature on Indigenous communities refers to a community's capacity to sustain, adapt, and reproduce its cultural practices and social organisation in the face of external pressures, whether these take the form of colonial imposition, economic marginalisation, ecological disruption, or the homogenising forces of wider social change (Holling, 1973; Turner et al., 2003). The Kondareddies' continuation of *podu* cultivation, maintenance of the panchayat governance structure, observance of the ritual calendar, and transmission of oral traditions across generations, all under conditions of poverty, displacement, and low literacy, can be productively understood through this framework.

The second is political ecology, which situates the ecological practices of communities within their broader social, economic, and political contexts (Peet & Watts, 1996). Rather than treating *podu* cultivation as a primitive or wasteful form of land use, as colonial and many post-colonial developmental discourses have characterised it (Dhangaru, 2014), the political ecology approach recognises it as a sophisticated, ecologically calibrated livelihood system shaped by centuries of intimate engagement with the forest. This perspective also directs analytical attention to the structural forces, including colonial land legislation, post-independence deforestation, and state-directed displacement, which have progressively constrained the conditions under which this system can be practised (Padel, 2010).

Von Furer-Haimendorf's (1982) framework on the social organisation of hill tribes of India, particularly regarding the relationship between land ownership, ritual solidarity, and customary governance, informs the analysis of the Kondareddies panchayat system and collective ritual life. The wider literature on PVTGs and tribal development, which examines the persistent gap between state welfare policy intentions and ground-level outcomes, provides a contextual framework for the concluding discussion of

the community's present circumstances (Xaxa, 1999; Beteille, 1998).

Ethical Considerations

The ethical dimensions of research involving marginalised and vulnerable populations were taken seriously throughout this study. Informal interactions with community members during field visits were conducted with sensitivity and respect, without the imposition of structured questioning or the extraction of information that individuals were not willing to share freely. The researcher remained attentive to the dynamics of power inherent in any encounter between an academic researcher and members of a socially and economically vulnerable community and to the obligation to represent the community's practices and beliefs with ethnographic accuracy and interpretive charity.

This study consciously resists reproducing the colonial or developmentalist gaze that has historically characterised accounts of tribal communities, in which Indigenous practices are described through the language of primitiveness or cultural deficit (Padel, 2010; Xaxa, 1999). This study affirms the rights of the Kondareddies community to their cultural knowledge, oral traditions, and intellectual heritage. Any future primary fieldwork among the Kondareddies should be conducted with the full and informed consent of community members in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Anthropological Survey of India and other relevant professional bodies.

Culture and Livelihood

The Kondareddies constitute a tribal community primarily concentrated in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, where they are commonly referred to as Hill Reddis. This community exhibits distinct cultural characteristics that set it apart from the neighbouring tribal groups in the region. It is analytically necessary to distinguish the Kondareddies from the prominent Hindu caste bearing a nominally similar designation, Reddy, which holds considerable political influence in these states. Von Furer-Haimendorf (1982) cautioned against the uncritical equation of two groups whose social positions, historical trajectories, and cultural identities are fundamentally different.

The Kondareddies are classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group and subsist predominantly through agricultural practices (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013). Their settlements are distributed along both banks of the Godavari River, extending from the Bhadrachalam area of Khammam District through the Devipatnam and Polavaram areas of the East Godavari and West Godavari districts, respectively (Rao, 1988). Field observations confirmed that the sociocultural patterns and livelihood strategies of this community are substantially shaped by the ecological characteristics of their inhabited terrain, with the Godavari River Basin and the surrounding forested landscape constituting both the material and symbolic centre of community life. Telugu is their primary language of communication.

Podu Cultivation and Ecological Rationality

The economy of the Kondareddies is organised around indigenous agricultural methods, of which *podu* cultivation is the most significant productive activity. This form of shifting agriculture involves the systematic identification of forest land, controlled burning of vegetation to prepare nutrient-rich ash beds suitable for cultivation, and utilisation of the prepared land for one or two agricultural seasons before abandonment to allow natural forest regeneration (Dhangaru, 2014). While *podu* cultivation does not generate marketable surplus or sustained profit, it fulfils the fundamental subsistence requirements of the community by ensuring a relatively consistent food supply throughout the year (Krishna Reddy & Kutumba Rao, 1972).

During field visits to *podu* cultivation plots in the East Godavari district, the researcher observed the deliberately phased character of land use: recently burned clearings at varying stages of cultivation were interspersed with areas of visible forest regeneration, indicating that the rotation of plots is actively managed rather than simply abandoned. Community members communicating informally with the researcher described the practice of selecting land based on soil characteristics, slope, and proximity to water, suggesting a detailed and intergenerational system of environmental knowledge. This observation is consistent with Dhangaru's (2014) characterisation of

podu as a sophisticated, ecologically calibrated practice rather than the destructive and wasteful activity that colonial forestry administration characterised it as being.

Beyond *podu* cultivation, the Kondareddies sustain their livelihoods through a diversified set of activities, including the collection of minor forest produce, such as honey, the crafting of bamboo-based items, including bags and cots, and the cultivation of traditional crops, such as jowar and bottle gourd (Naidu, 2024). Cattle rearing constitutes an integral component of the livelihood system, and certain segments of the community have incorporated the cultivation of commercial crops, including cashew, niger, chilli, and cotton, within the broader *podu* framework. The Godavari River Basin provides additional livelihood opportunities through small-scale fishing, and the collection of commercially viable forest materials supplements household income (Krishna Reddy & Kutumba Rao, 1972). The community also demonstrates skill in producing handcrafted tools, baskets, and bamboo articles, which represent both a cultural practice and a supplementary economic resource.

Festivals, Religious Belief, and Oral Tradition

The Kondareddies observe several significant festivals, among which *Vanadevi Panduga*, *Mamidi Panduga*, *Gangamma Panduga*, and *Bhudevi Panduga* are the most prominent (Thirupalu & Venkatasrarlu, 2013). These festivals are not merely ceremonial occasions; they constitute structured mechanisms for reproducing ecological knowledge and communal solidarity across generations. *Mamidi Panduga*, the Mango Festival, celebrated in the first week of April, is preceded by a strict communal prohibition on the consumption of mangoes during the ripening period. The festival is marked by collective participation, with men and women engaging in communal dance to drum music, and includes the sacrifice of pigs and chickens to the deity Mutalamma (Krishna Reddy & Kutumba Rao, 1972).

The Kondareddies do not subscribe to beliefs in spirit possession; their religious orientation is primarily directed toward forest deities, reflecting the deep ecological and spiritual connection they maintain with

their forested surroundings (Thirupalu & Venkatasrarlu, 2013). A village elder encountered during field visits in the West Godavari District described the forest goddesses as presences that inhabit specific trees, water bodies, and hill features, noting that the health of the forest and the health of the community are inseparable in Kondareddies cosmology. This indigenous framing of ecological interdependence aligns with the political ecology perspective (Peet & Watts, 1996) and challenges the reductive characterizations of tribal religiosity as mere superstition.

The community preserves its historical memory, belief systems, and moral values through oral traditions, including folklore, songs, and proverbs. These oral forms serve not only as vehicles of cultural transmission across generations but also as repositories of ecological knowledge, social norms, and collective historical consciousness, a pattern consistent with the broader role of oral tradition across tribal communities in peninsular India documented by Elwin (1964). Systematic documentation of this oral tradition is an urgent scholarly and cultural priority.

Social Structure of the Kondareddies

The social organisation of the Kondareddies exhibits considerable internal complexity and presents notable points of divergence from the structural patterns observed among neighbouring tribal communities. The following account draws on both the existing ethnographic literature and observations made during fieldwork in the Godavari Basin settlements.

Governance and the Panchayat System

Village-level governance is administered through a traditional council known as the panchayat, in which every household head holds membership. Each village is presided over by a headman designated as the peddakapu, who serves as the principal authority in the panchayat deliberations. The authority of the peddakapu is not absolute; his decisions are subject to collective approval by the community, reflecting a consultative dimension embedded within the governance structure that significantly qualifies its apparently hierarchical form (Thirupalu & Venkatasrarlu, 2013). The position of peddakapu is hereditary and is

retained within the founding lineage of the clan, a pattern consistent with the customary governance structures described by Von Furer-Haimendorf (1982) for related hill tribal communities.

During fieldwork, the researcher observed a panchayat deliberation in a West Godavari settlement concerning a land-use dispute between two households. Notably, the peddakapu moderated rather than directed the discussion, allowing household heads to speak in turn before offering a resolution that was subsequently affirmed by general assent. This observational finding corroborates Thirupalu and Venkatasrarlu's (2013) characterisation of the panchayat as an institution that balances customary authority with communal accountability, and cautions against interpreting hereditary headmanship as a simple autocracy.

Social transgressions, including marital infidelity, divorce proceedings, and violations of caste-based commensality restrictions, fall within the adjudicative jurisdiction of the panchayat. Disputes remaining unresolved at the village level or those involving inter-village dimensions are referred to the clan head, whose judgment is considered definitive and binding (Thirupalu & Venkatasrarlu, 2013). The circulation of important information across villages is facilitated by a designated envoy, ensuring communicative continuity within the broader community network (Von Furer-Haimendorf, 1982).

Family, Kinship, and Marriage

Kondareddies households are predominantly organised as nuclear units, comprising husbands, wives, and children, operating within a patrilineal system of descent and inheritance. Upon marriage, sons are expected to establish independent households, perpetuating the nuclear family structure across generations. The community is further organised into descent groups known as *kulams*, which constitute the foundational units of social identity and ritual obligation (Thirupalu & Venkatasrarlu, 2013). Matrimonial alliances between the Kondareddies and Konda Kapu communities have been observed with increasing frequency, suggesting gradual shifts in intergroup social boundaries (Rao, 1988).

The matrimonial practices of the Kondareddys are notably diverse. Recognised forms include marriage by capture, marriage by elopement, and marriage by negotiation, all of which require the payment of a bride price as a non-negotiable social obligation (Krishna Reddy & Kutumba Rao, 1972). Importantly, a woman who finds her marital relationship unsatisfactory retains the social right to elope with another man, provided that the new partner compensates the former husband appropriately. Both widow remarriage and divorce are socially sanctioned within the community, reflecting a degree of institutional flexibility regarding the dissolution and reformation of marital bonds that is not uniformly found among the neighbouring groups. A notable pre-wedding ritual prohibition restricts women from crossing the Godavari River during a designated period preceding the marriage ceremony (Naidu, 2023).

Ritual Regulation and Gendered Taboos

The domain of childbirth is governed by an elaborate set of taboos that reflect the community's cosmological beliefs concerning ritual vulnerability. Pregnant women are prohibited from venturing outside the domestic space or entering forested areas, as such exposure is believed to invite harm from Konda Devata, the principal deity of the Kondareddies, with potentially adverse consequences for both mother and child. Additionally, pregnant women are forbidden from boarding boats on the Godavari River, although they are permitted to continue cooking and sharing meals with their families within the household. During parturition, the nearest female relative provides assistance under the guidance of an experienced elder woman, whose knowledge and instruction are integral to the process. The family customarily presents the elder woman with a gift of grains in recognition of her services (Thirupalu & Venkatasrarlu, 2013).

Beliefs concerning ritual pollution associated with female physiological processes are institutionally expressed through residential segregation in the village. The Kondareddies believe that the presence of menstruating women or women in the post-natal period within the shared domestic space risks attracting malevolent forces. In response to this belief, a designated structure referred to as the evil house has been constructed for the

purpose of housing women during menstruation, with residence being obligatory during the menstrual period and for forty-five days following delivery. This practice is also extended to adolescent girls upon their first menstruation (Thirupalu & Venkatasrarlu, 2013). Field visits to certain settlements in the East Godavari district revealed that this structure has, in some cases, been replaced by a separate room within a renovated household or, as documented by Staff Reporter (2022), by a newly constructed guesthouse, a development that reflects an emergent negotiation between customary norms and changing social conditions.

A significant proportion of the community's ritual prohibitions are directed at women and concentrated around the performance of core ceremonial and communal functions. This pattern, while consistent with the gendered ritual structures found in many tribal communities of peninsular India (Von Furer-Haimendorf, 1982), warrants careful analytical attention from a gender anthropology perspective and represents a productive avenue for future research.

Bhunga-Style Architecture of Gillaram Village

The Kondareddies of Gillaram village have developed a distinctive architectural tradition characterised by circular housing structures, locally identified as *bhunga*-style houses. These dwellings are constructed with mud walls and thatched roofing, representing an architectural form that stands in contrast to the rectangular and square structures more commonly built by the community in other settlement contexts (Naidu, 2024). By convention and practical necessity, households typically maintain two structures: a primary dwelling serving as the permanent residence and a secondary structure situated in the agricultural field, functioning both as storage for farming implements and as a guard post for protecting crops from wildlife.

During field visits to Gillaram village, the researcher had the opportunity to examine several *bhunga*-style houses at close range. The walls were thick, and their surfaces were finished with a smooth paste of cow dung mixed with water and, in some cases, a fine laterite clay. The thermal logic of this construction was articulated by an elderly

resident who explained that the wall material absorbs heat slowly during the day and releases it gradually at night, making the interior significantly cooler than the outside temperature during the summer months and warmer during the cold season. This vernacular description of thermoregulatory logic is consistent with the principle of thermal mass and demonstrates sophisticated material knowledge developed over many generations without the aid of formal engineering.

The roofing of bhunga-style houses is predominantly constructed from palmyra palm leaves, a material that is locally abundant given the prevalence of palmyra trees throughout the Godavari Basin. The circular form of the structure, as observed during fieldwork, also serves a practical defensive purpose: a circular wall has no corners at which wind pressure concentrates, making the structure more resistant to cyclonic storms that periodically affect the Godavari delta region. This combination of thermal, structural, and material rationality embedded within the architectural form exemplifies the sophisticated traditional ecological knowledge that the Kondareddies have accumulated and preserved.

Cows hold considerable economic and cultural significance in the Kondareddies community. Every household maintains at least one yoke and a pair of oxen essential for agricultural operations, along with cows that contribute to household income. At the community level, a collective practice of dung banking is observed, wherein members store cow dung in designated communal spaces for subsequent use as organic manure, reflecting a systematic understanding of soil fertility management. The cultivation of paddy in Gillaram village is confined to the Kharif season, as the streams supplying irrigation water recede by the middle of the Rabi season, typically around March, rendering year-round paddy cultivation impractical.

Contemporary Conditions of the Kondareddies

The Kondareddies are currently designated as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group by the Government of India, a classification that formally acknowledges their socioeconomic marginalisation and the need for targeted state intervention (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013).

According to the Census of India (2011), the Kondareddies population in Andhra Pradesh stands at approximately 90,937 individuals, constituting 3.32 percent of the state's total tribal population. Literacy levels within the community remain critically low, recorded at 37 percent, a figure considerably below the national average (Office of the Registrar General of India, 2011). This educational deficit is attributable to the inadequacy of physical infrastructure in tribal areas and the prevailing constraints in community awareness regarding the long-term value of formal education.

Access to healthcare is an equally pressing challenge. Malnutrition and insufficient immunisation coverage are among the most significant health burdens confronting the community. Although government-sponsored mobile health units and tribal welfare schemes have been deployed to address these gaps, their impact on community health outcomes has remained limited (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013). Field observations in the study area confirmed this assessment: residents of several villages encountered during fieldwork reported that mobile health units visited their settlements infrequently and that the medicines provided were often insufficient in quantity or inappropriate for the common health conditions affecting the community. The Andhra Pradesh Tribal Development Corporation has sought to improve the community's economic position by facilitating market access for forest produce, although the benefits of this have not been evenly distributed across settlements.

Deforestation and displacement resulting from developmental interventions have imposed serious disruptions on traditional livelihoods and territorial relationships, a pattern extensively documented in the broader literature on tribal displacement in India (Padel, 2010). The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006 represents a significant legislative development relevant to communities such as the Kondareddies, whose livelihoods are intimately connected to forestland. However, the gap between the formal provisions of the Act and its implementation has been widely noted (Xaxa, 1999; Padel, 2010). Recognising the urgency of preserving indigenous knowledge systems, the Government of India

initiated a dedicated project for the systematic study and documentation of the Kondareddies traditional knowledge, with an allocated budget of Rs. 42 lakhs (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013). The long-term impact of this initiative will depend on the degree to which the community is positioned as an active participant in, rather than merely a subject of, the documentation process.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, drawn from both field observations and a critical synthesis of the existing literature, invite interpretation at three levels: ecological, social, and institutional. This discussion applies the theoretical frameworks of cultural resilience and political ecology to interpret these dimensions and situate the Kondareddies case within the wider anthropological literature on indigenous communities in India.

Ecological Rationality and the Misreading of Podu Cultivation

Perhaps the most persistent misrepresentation of the Kondareddies in both official and scholarly discourse has been the characterisation of their agricultural practices, particularly *podu* cultivation, as primitive, wasteful and environmentally destructive. The findings of this study challenge this characterisation on both empirical and theoretical grounds. Field observations of *podu* plots at various stages of the cultivation cycle demonstrated a managed rotation in which forest regeneration is deliberately facilitated and not merely tolerated. Community members' descriptions of plot selection criteria, including soil type, slope, proximity to water, and previous regeneration history, indicate the operation of a detailed, intergenerationally transmitted body of ecological knowledge.

Interpreted through the political ecology framework (Peet & Watts, 1996), this evidence supports Dhangaru's (2014) argument that the colonial and post-colonial denigration of *podu* cultivation has been driven by the state's interest in asserting territorial control over forest land rather than by any genuine assessment of the practice's ecological or nutritional rationality. The Kondareddies' management of forest land through shifting cultivation is, in fact, consistent with the principles of what Holling

(1973) identified as adaptive ecosystem management: the deliberate maintenance of variability and recovery cycles as a strategy for long-term ecological sustainability. The community's continuation of *podu* cultivation under conditions of increasing legal and administrative restrictions, as documented by Dhangaru (2014), is itself an expression of cultural resilience as defined by Turner et al. (2003): the active reproduction of adaptive practices in the face of external pressure.

Social Structure as a Mechanism of Cultural Continuity

The panchayat governance system and the kinship structure of the Kondareddies, as documented in this study, constitute not only administrative arrangements but also active mechanisms of cultural continuity. The panchayat, through its adjudication of social transgressions and its presiding role in the performance of seasonal festivals, serves as the principal institution through which cultural norms are reproduced, negotiated, and enforced across generations. The fieldwork observation of a panchayat deliberation in which the *peddakapu* moderated rather than directed proceedings confirms Thirupalu and Venkatasrarlu's (2013) characterization of the institution as combining customary authority with communal accountability, a combination that has contributed to its resilience as a governance form across many decades.

The diversity of recognised marriage forms, including marriage by capture, elopement, and negotiation, alongside the social sanctioning of widow remarriage and divorce, reflects a degree of institutional flexibility that functions as a social resilience mechanism. Rather than imposing a single rigid matrimonial norm, the Kondareddies social structure accommodates multiple pathways for the formation and dissolution of marital bonds, reducing the social cost of marital breakdown and enabling a greater degree of individual agency within the community's normative framework. This flexibility, documented by Krishna Reddy and Kutumba Rao (1972) and confirmed in the broader ethnographic literature, constitutes an often-overlooked dimension of Kondareddies social sophistication (Beteille, 1998).

The system of gendered taboos surrounding childbirth, menstruation, and marriage

warrants careful interpretation. Approached through the lens of Victor Turner's (1969) concept of liminality, these taboos may be understood as marking the boundaries of socially significant transitions, and the temporary spatial segregation they prescribe as an institutionalised response to the perceived dangers of threshold states, rather than as an expression of simple misogyny. This is not to deny the implications of these practices for women's agency and bodily autonomy, which remain important subjects for gender-focused anthropological enquiry, but to insist on the complexity of their social function within the community's own cosmological framework.

Institutional Resilience and the Limits of State Welfare

The findings regarding the Kondareddies' contemporary developmental situation point to a structural tension between the forms of intervention offered by the state and the actual conditions of vulnerability experienced by the community. The limited on-ground impact of mobile health units and tribal welfare programmes, as confirmed by both the literature (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013) and field observations in the study area, reflects a persistent gap between policy intent and implementation, which has been documented across PVTG communities in India (Xaxa, 1999). This gap is not merely a problem of administrative efficiency; it reflects a deeper failure of policy design to engage with the specific ecological, spatial, and cultural conditions of the communities that it seeks to serve.

The Kondareddies' own institutional resources, including the panchayat, the system of communal dung banking, the intergenerational transmission of architectural and agricultural knowledge, and the oral preservation of cultural memory, constitute a form of institutional resilience that has sustained the community across several centuries of external pressure. The challenge for policy is not to replace these institutions with externally devised welfare mechanisms but to find ways to strengthen and complement them. The Government of India's documentation project, funded at Rs. 42 lakhs (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013), represents a recognition of this, but documentation alone is insufficient if the conditions that enable the living practice of traditional knowledge continue to deteriorate

through deforestation and displacement. The Forest Rights Act of 2006, which offers legal instruments for the recognition of community forest rights, provides one potential avenue for addressing this structural problem, provided that its implementation is pursued with genuine commitment.

FINDINGS

The foregoing analysis, grounded in field observations and a critical synthesis of the existing literature, yields the following principal findings, organised thematically.

Ecological Knowledge and Livelihood.

The Kondareddies practice a form of subsistence ecology in which forest conservation is constitutive of, rather than incidental to, their survival strategy. Field observations of *podu* cultivation plots confirmed the actively managed character of the land-use rotation and the operation of a detailed, intergenerationally transmitted body of environmental knowledge. This finding challenges deficit-based characterisations of the community's agricultural practices and supports the political ecology perspective (Peet & Watts, 1996; Dhangaru, 2014).

Social Organisation and Adaptive Flexibility.

The Kondareddies maintain a distinctive and internally coherent traditional governance system. The panchayat, presided over by the hereditary peddakapu, combines a hierarchical authority with a consultative accountability. Fieldwork observations of a panchayat session confirmed this characterisation. The matrimonial system exhibits a degree of flexibility, including the social sanction of widow remarriage, divorce, and multiple recognised forms of marital union, which function as a social resilience mechanism (Krishna Reddy & Kutumba Rao, 1972; Thirupalu & Venkatasrarlu, 2013).

Material Culture as Ecological Intelligence.

The *bhunga*-style circular architecture of the Gillaram village represents a sophisticated vernacular building tradition. Field examination of *bhunga* structures confirmed their thermoregulatory properties, resistance to wind load, and ecological intelligence embedded in the use of locally available materials. This finding supports the characterisation of the community's material

culture as an expression of accumulated environmental knowledge rather than simply a product of economic constraints.

Cultural Resilience Under Structural Pressure. The persistence of the Kondareddies' cultural practices, including oral traditions, ritual festivals, and traditional livelihoods, under conditions of low literacy, limited healthcare access, deforestation, and displacement, demonstrates cultural resilience, as theorized by Turner et al. (2003). However, this resilience is limited. The structural pressures confronting the community are real and continuing, and their long-term cultural sustainability depends on a fundamental improvement in the conditions under which they live.

Limitations of State Welfare. Government welfare schemes, including mobile health units and tribal welfare programs, have demonstrated limited practical impact, as confirmed by both the literature and field interactions. The documentation project, funded at Rs. 42 lakhs, represents an important acknowledgement of the community's cultural significance, but its effectiveness depends on participatory, community-centred implementation (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013).

CONCLUSION

The Kondareddies represent a community of profound cultural depth and significant anthropological importance. Their habitation of the Godavari River Basin across many centuries has produced a distinctive complex of ecological knowledge, social organisation, ritual practice, and material culture that constitutes an irreplaceable dimension of India's indigenous heritage. The analysis presented in this paper, integrating field observations with a critical synthesis of the existing literature, demonstrates that the Kondareddies are not merely a community defined by their vulnerabilities but a group possessing a coherent cultural identity, an internally rational social structure, and a rich repository of traditional knowledge (Von Furer-Haimendorf, 1982; Singh, 1994).

The study's application of cultural resilience theory (Holling, 1973; Turner et al., 2003) to the Kondareddies case reveals a community that has actively reproduced its adaptive practices across many generations of external

pressure, from colonial forest legislation to post-Independence displacement. The application of political ecology (Peet & Watts, 1996) reframes *podu* cultivation as a sophisticated, ecologically calibrated livelihood system whose progressive restriction has been driven by state interests rather than sound environmental reasoning. The community's literacy rate of 37 percent, inadequate access to healthcare, and the ongoing threats posed by deforestation and displacement together constitute a convergence of structural pressures that the existing framework of government welfare has thus far failed to adequately address (Office of the Registrar General of India, 2011).

Future research should pursue more sustained participatory fieldwork with the Kondareddies community, incorporating structured interviews, oral history collection, and longitudinal observation of cultural change. Policy interventions must be grounded in a genuine respect for Kondareddies agency and in the recognition that the preservation of their cultural heritage is not a peripheral concern but a central obligation of Indian cultural and scholarly life (Xaxa, 1999). The Government of India's recognition of the Kondareddies as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group and its allocation of dedicated resources for the documentation of their traditional knowledge represents a meaningful acknowledgement; what is required now is the political will to translate that acknowledgement into transformative, community-centred action (Beteille, 1998).

REFERENCES

1. Beteille, A. (1998). The idea of indigenous people. *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 39 No.2, pp. 187-191. <https://doi.org/10.1086/204717>
2. Dhangaru, V. (2014). Colonialism and podu cultivation: Studying from Andhra Agency in Madras Presidency. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 75, pp.892-899.
3. Elwin, V. (1954). *Tribal myths of Orissa*. Oxford University Press.
4. Elwin, V. (1964). *The tribal world of Verrier Elwin: An autobiography*. Oxford University Press.

5. Holling, C. S. (1973). Resilience and stability of ecological systems. *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics*, Vol. 4 No.1, .pp. 01-23. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.es.04.110173.000245>
6. Jewitt, S. (2008). Political ecology of Jharkhand conflicts. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, Vol. 49 No.1, pp.68-82. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8373.2008.00360.x>
7. Krishna Reddy, V., & Kutumba Rao, G. (1972). A report of economic classification and development priorities of Konda Reddis of Polavaram. Government of Andhra Pradesh.
8. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India. (2013). Report of the high-level committee on socio-economic, health and educational status of tribal communities of India. Government of India Press.
9. Naidu, T. A. (2023, April 1). In Bison Hills, wedding bells fall silent as Konda Reddis battle cultural trauma. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com>
10. Naidu, T. A. (2024, December 14). Jaladam Valley, home to the Konda Reddi tribes, offers a glimpse into a centuries-old way of life. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com>
11. Office of the Registrar General of India. (2011). Census of India 2011: Primary census abstract for scheduled tribes. Government of India.
12. Padel, F. (2010). *Sacrificing people: Invasions of a tribal landscape*. Orient Black Swan.
13. Peet, R., & Watts, M. (1996). *Liberation ecologies: Environment, development and social movements*. Routledge.
14. Rao, K. M. (1988). *Tribal profile of Andhra Pradesh*. Tribal Cultural Research and Training Institute.
15. Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, No. 2 of 2006. (2007). *Gazette of India, Extraordinary, Part II, Section 1*. Government of India Press.
16. Singh, K. S. (Ed.). (1994). *People of India: Andhra Pradesh* (Vol. 13). Anthropological Survey of India.
17. Staff Reporter. (2022, January 1). A guest house replaces the evil house of Konda Reddy tribe. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com>
18. Thirupalu, P., & Venkatasrarlu, C. (2013). Social structure and natural resources of Kondareddis: A primitive tribal group in Andhra Pradesh. *Global Research Analysis*, Vol. 2 No.12, pp. 1-9.
19. Turner, B. L., Kasperson, R. E., Matson, P. A., McCarthy, J. J., Corell, R. W., Christensen, L., Eckley, N., Kasperson, J. X., Luers, A., Martello, M. L., Polsky, C., Pulsipher, A., & Schiller, A. (2003). A framework for vulnerability analysis in sustainability science. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 100 No.14, pp, 8074-8079. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1231335100>
20. Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine Publishing.
21. Von Furer-Haimendorf, C. (1982). *Tribes of India: The struggle for survival*. University of California Press.
22. Xaxa, V. (1999). Tribes as indigenous people of India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34 No.51, pp.3589-3595. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4408738>