

Documentation of intangible cultural heritage practices of the gonds of Telangana: A case study of Nagoba Jatara festival of the Raj Gonds

Krishna Jayeshbhai Trivedi¹, Professor Deepak John Mathew²

¹(Corresponding Author) Research Scholar, Department of Design, Indian Institute of Technology
Hyderabad

Email md20resch11003@iith.ac.in

²Professor & Head, Department of Design, Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad

Abstract

Gonds are one of the largest and the earliest indigenous communities of India. The four Gond Kingdom – Graha Mandala, Deogarh, Kherla and Chanda formed the region known as "Gondwana". The Raj Gonds of Adilabad are the successors of the Chanda rulers. Their legacy of cultural heritage is carried out from Generation to Generation. All the tangible and intangible cultural heritage is on the verge of extinction due to the rapid urbanization, heavy influence and adaptation of popular culture and migration from native places to the cities. Intangible cultural heritage can be preserved in the form of documentation. The promotion of cultural practices can save the heritage by keeping the practices alive. Nagoba Jatara is one of the significant festivals still carried out and celebrated in traditional manners by the Raj Gonds. Documentation of such festivals and associated intangible cultural practices is a significant attempt to safeguard and preserve living practices of the Gondi Culture. The paper presents the case study of the Keslapur Nagoba Jatara. The methods used for data collection are field visits, ethnographic interviews, focused group interviews, participant observation and audio-visual documentation of the festival. This paper attempts to understand, analyze, and discuss the Gonds' indigenous cultural practices performed at Nagoba Jatara Festival, belief systems associated with various cultural and ceremonial ritualistic practices and the importance of documentation to preserve the intangible cultural heritage practices.

Keywords: Gond Tribe, Indigenous beliefs and rituals, Intangible cultural heritage, Cultural Anthropology, Ethnography, Documentation and preservation

1 Introduction

The Nagoba Jatara is one of the major festivals of the Raj Gonds of Telangana. With the changing times and under the influence of Popular culture, the indigenous cultural practices are gradually declining. An effort to bring attention to various aspects of the Gondi culture and tradition is sorely lacking, and as a result, many of them are dying out. Attempts need to be made to formally document, study and promote these ways of life. Thus, Documenting the Intangible Cultural traditions of the indigenous communities is an essential step towards safeguarding cultural heritage practices. As per UNESCO convention 2003, the traditional living heritage of the communities includes practices, representations, expressions, skills and traditional knowledge. The presented study attempts to understand, analyze, and discuss the Gonds' indigenous cultural practices performed at Nagoba Jatara Festival, their belief systems associated with various cultural and ceremonial ritualistic practices, and the importance of documentation to preserve the intangible cultural heritage practices of the Raj Gonds.

1.1 Raj Gonds and Gondwana

Gonds are one of the earliest and the largest indigenous communities of India. The entire area of the Southern and the Central Deccan plateau was known as the "Gondwana". The four Gond Kingdom – Graha Mandala, Deogarh, Kherla and Chanda formed the region known as "Gondwana". In central-southern India, the Kingdom of Gond Rulers was

Documentation of intangible cultural heritage practices of the gonds of Telangana: A case study of Nagoba Jatara festival of the Raj Gonds

called "Chanda ". The region is presently divided into the Chandrapur District of Maharashtra, and the Adilabad District of Telangana was the ruling capital of the Raj Gond Kings. The remains of Manikgarh fort and the ruins of Utnoor fort mark the evidence of the princely kingdoms of Chanda of Gondwana. The Gond rulers held their power in the forest and hill tracts until the mid-eighteenth century; even after the frequent territorial conflicts with the Golcondas, the Marathas and the Mughals, the Gond rajas continued to rule the "Gondwana" till the mid of 18th century. (Bhukya, 2008) The Raj Gonds have distinctive traditional cultural heritage and a legacy still in practice by the successors of the Chanda Rulers. The festivals like Nagoba Jatara, Dussehra, *Dandari Gusadi* dance, *Shivaboari*, *Aakadi*¹ and Diwali are significant celebrations carried out traditionally by the Raj Gonds of Adilabad.

2. Background of the Study

To understand the various aspects of culture and intangible cultural heritage and gain detailed insights on the studies previously done on Nagoba Jatara and the Raj Gond Tribe systematic literature review was done.

2.1. Festivals as intangible cultural heritage

Culture is a set of values, ideas, and symbols shared within a distinct group that individuals use to communicate with others as a part of the community, evaluate, and eventually interpret certain behaviors and events (Baligh, 1998). In other words, culture is the common characteristic that distinguishes a group from another (D. A. Griffith et al., 2000). A festival is a complex concept that displays the perceptions of a community with all its activities and rituals regarding its culture and world vision (Avcikurt et al., n.d.) According to Abdulkadir Inan (1954), Intangible Cultural heritage associated with community festivals can be defined as seasonal ceremonies and celebrations, where group identities are displayed and shared by the group itself as a collective phenomenon on days based on the local calendar followed by the community (José et al., 2012), Which represents cultural forms containing complex and multipurpose customs originating in the lives of the community. Hence, festivals, recognized as a part of intangible cultural heritage, are the cultural values that should be passed on to future generations in their original forms by conserving their traditional characteristics. (José et al., 2012). The folkloric and celebratory festivals, inseparably linked to intangible elements in terms of the collective recognition of identity, the passing on of rituals and customs, or even the individual assertion of social identities, includes in the intangible cultural heritage practices of the communities (José et al., 2012)

The UNESCO convention 2003 defines the border definitions of "Culture", including cultural elements of an immaterial nature such as customs, folklore, oral and performing traditions, religious manifestations, which have also come to form part of the list of items included in cultural heritage. (José et al., 2012) Thus, Festivals have been a part of intangible cultural heritage that communities have built along with their values for centuries. Festivals are a complex whole comprising Cultural values, beliefs, collective identity and object's capacity to interact with the memories (Vecco, 2010). Cultural festivals showcase and re-interpret a cultural legacy and may thus be considered as historical heritage and intangible cultural heritage. (Avcikurt et al., n.d.)

Since the Paris Convention 2003 recognizes performing arts, social practices, and ritual and festive events as manifestations of intangible heritage, many of these festivals or celebrations have even been nominated by UNESCO as Intangible Heritage of Humanity. (Blake, J. 2008) As Jose (2012) defines cultural festivals as an expression of immaterial cultural heritage, they include several tangible elements in consumption and activities linked to their planning and a related economic impact. All of these aspects make cultural festivals a particular expression of intangible heritage.

2.2 Nagoba Jatara of Raj Gonds

The Gonds of Adilabad district celebrate Nagoba festival every year on '*Pushya Bahula*²' Amavasya (December – January) at Keslapur village situated nearly 20 Km from Utnoor. Nagoba, a Cobra Deity (Sri Sessa as called by Gonds), is the supreme deity (Persa Pen) of seven divine ancestors of the Mesram clan. (Pandey, n.d.) Only 22 Mesram families enjoy the right to perform worshipping pooja. They are called '*Meshroor*' Temples are open to all when they complete their puja worship. The Fair is believed to be one of the oldest traditions continuing from the last 500 years. (Salunke, 2014) as defined by Talluru (2018), Nagoba Jatara is a delight to the attendees. Many tribes from different states assemble to worship their God Nagoba. The ritual is the direct adaptation and improvisation of the events derived from The Myth, which their ancestors passed on to them. Every year, the ritual is followed meticulously. Bhukya (2017) stated that the state had converted Keslapur Jatara into a Gond Darbar to reach out to the Indigenous Community, through which the state heard and resolved Gond grievances.

¹ *Gusadi* dance, *Shivaboari*, *Aakadi* are the local and traditional festivals celebrated by the Raj Gonds of Adilabad.

² *Pushya Bahula* is a Month in Gondi Calendar, which comes around December and January

The cultural practices are deeply interwoven with the power structure and identity of any community. The Hindu and other religions' political influences and the forced cultural and religious imposition attempt have hampered the Gond identity, echoing in the present day since colonial times (Bhukya,2017), and it is profoundly impacting the ceremonial practices of the Raj Gonds affecting the celebrations of major tribal cultural festivals.

3. Methodology

The methods used for the present study are visual ethnography and a case study of the Nagoba Jatara festival. The present data is collected from the field visit to the sacred temple at Keslapur Villages in Adilabad district, Telangana. Data collection includes field visits, ethnographic interviews, focused group interviews, and participant observation. Audio-visual documentation of the cultural festival Nagoba Jatara has been done and presented here as a case study. The secondary data has been collected from the existing literature on the Intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO convocation 2003. The data analysis has been carried out based on the ethnographic interviews of the community leaders and the conversations with the community members presented at the Jatara.

4. Nagoba Jatara: A perpetual traditional festival

Raj Gonds of Mesram Clans are the descendants of seven God ancestors of the Gond Community. Nagoba Jatara is an important festival for the Mesram Gonds. The Jatara is segmented into many activities; some of the significant rituals have been covered in the present study.

Twenty-two sub-clans of Raj Gonds of Mesram clan all gather at the giant banyan tree. The place is known as '*Rajdhani*'³ among Gonds. The entire area converts into a temporary community hamlet for five to six days. Nagoba Jatara festivals usually occur in January after seeing the new moon of 'Pushya Bahula'. The head chief '*Tirupati*' after the summon of the Village head '*Patel*' began to visit 22 Mesram clan villages to spread the word regarding the event Procession of Nagoba Jatara. According to folklore, the Rituals for the Nagoba Jatara begin with a procession to get the holy water from Godavari Dawn at "*Hastina Madugu*". Nagoba is believed to have quenched his thirst hereafter accepting the "*Naivedyam*." To fetch the Holy water, all elderly men of the community go dressed up in white attire and barefoot from Forest to the holy spot at the Godavari and bring the sacred water in one specific utensil called '*Jhari*'⁴ According to the community members, it is a 1400-year-old water container, a sacred and auspicious utensil. Women of the community are prohibited from touching this utensil and taking part in this procession.

In Indervelly Mandal at Keslapur Village, the Gonds and Pradhan elders' carrying sacred water in '*Jhari* from '*Hastina Madugu*' of Godavari River receive traditional welcome under the old Banyan Tree. Rituals performed at Keslapur Nagoba Jatara begins in the Morning. The Mesram elders place the sacred '*Jhari* before performing Puja. The Gonds purify the temple with Ganga Jal prior to beginning any rituals. Gonds carry the '*Jhari* and start the procession towards the main shrine. '*Pradhans* accompany them with musical instruments. Women of the Mesram clan carry food offerings - '*Naivedyam*' on their heads and join the procession.



Figure 1: Arrival of Gond women at Temple with Naivedyam for Nagoba sacred well for the Ritual



Figure 2: Fetching water from a

The '*Naivedyam*' carried in the Bamboo baskets are made of freshly harvested food grains. The baskets must be of a particular shape and made out of bamboo only can be used for the '*Naivedyam*' offering. The ritual symbolizes thanksgiving for the crop harvested in the last season. In the entire procession, the Pradhan plays an essential role by

³ '*Rajdhani*'- The term used in the context of Capital of Gondwana among the Raj Gonds

⁴ '*Jhari*' - A pot used to carry water from Godavari River for ceremonial purposes.

Documentation of intangible cultural heritage practices of the gonds of Telangana: A case study of Nagoba Jatara festival of the Raj Gonds

playing traditional instruments during the whole event. Pradhan walks in the front and plays instruments like "Kikari", "Surnai", "Bana", ⁵and other instruments in the entire processions. Patel walks right behind the Pradhans. It symbolizes that the Pradhans direct the path to Gonds and respect the Raj Gonds by playing instruments in their honor. After Patels, all remaining sub-clans of the Mesram follow the procession in the designated order. All the community members proceed towards the main shrine at Nagoba temple, and rituals start taking place in the temple. They place the sacred sticks with seven areas in mud and a bamboo stand to place the white cloth as a part of ritual and worship of Deities. Only men of the Mesram clan participated in this ritual. The ritual takes place behind the main shrine within the temple premise. On the other side, women start preparing the mud with cow dung and water for making an anthill. The community elders "Naikpod" give earthen pots to the daughters of the Mesram community married in the other gond communities. Women receive the pots in the pair of the two and carry the sacred water from the stepwell; they make anthills with the mud and the water they fetch from the stepwell. During the entire ritual, Pradhan plays musical instruments and sings folk songs. The ritual symbolizes worship of the residence of the God Nagoba.



Figure 3: Naikpod arranging earthen pots for the



Procession Figure 4: Preparation for Anthill Worship in Temple Premise



Figure 5: Ritual taking place in the Temple premise Anthill as part of the Ritual



Figure 6: Community women sculpting

In the Night, Gonds performs the 'Maha Puja' ⁶of Nagoba. also known as *Persa pen* ⁷Puja. During this time, outsiders are not allowed in the temple premises. Only the Gonds of the Mesram clan have the right to participate in this ceremony. This ritual marks the actual beginning of the annual tribal fair and festival of the Nagoba Jatara. Pradhans Play musical instruments and narrate the Gonds' oral history in the evenings, and all community members gather and enjoy the event every night during the festivals.

⁵ Kikari, Surnai, Bana – Traditional musical instruments used by the Pradhans in ceremonial practices of the Gonds

⁶ Maha Puja – Main Ritual – Nagoba worshipping ceremony.

⁷ Persa pen – Bada Deo, Main Deity



Figure 7: Naivedyam prepared by newlywed Daughter In-laws as a part of the ceremony Figure 8: Pradhans playing musical instruments as a part of the ceremony

The Nagoba Jatara also includes a major event called '*Bheting*',⁸ which welcomes the new brides into the clan. The clan follows an elaborate ritual, '*Bheting*', one of the essential ceremonies that take place during the Nagoba Jatara Festival. Through the '*Bheting*', the new daughters-in-law are formally introduced to the clan. All those married in the previous year need to be introduced to the clan deities through "*Bheting*" after this ceremony. After this ceremony, they become eligible to enter the temple, perform rites in the rituals, and participate in family rituals. Apart from these rituals, various other rituals also take place as a part of the Jatara, which includes '*Jangubai*'⁹ Jatara and '*Bodem*'¹⁰ dev Jatara.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The field visit to Nagoba Jatara gave insights into the current way of celebration of festivals at the Nagoba temple. The Jatara is not only a ceremonial festival. It is also marked as a place where the community unites to stay together for several days and conduct "*Sabha*"¹¹ to solve the community issues. The original aesthetics connected with the traditions are disappearing due to the pervasive interaction with other cultural groups. However, the Nagoba Jatara festival is still being carried out in traditional ways with a limited adaptation of the surrounding contemporary culture. It is observed that the Gonds are gradually getting accustomed with adaptation of contemporary trends in their mundane living, household articles, human attires and food habits. Significant changes in their traditions, customs, values, religious beliefs and rites have been observed which point towards a change in the ethos of the Gonds as a tribe. The ethnographic interviews conducted with the community members during the Jatara marked evidently the keenness and interest of Community's Younger generations in continuing and safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage by following traditional customs and rituals, which reflect their concerns towards communities' legacy and regional heritage. However due to the urbanization the gonds are migrating towards cities in search of job opportunities, which led to the limited scope of continuation of cultural practices in their mundane life. The Festival like Nagoba Jatara serves as a platform to celebrate the traditional living and to safeguard the Intangible cultural Practices. To ensure its existence through time, safeguarding the cultural practices will pave a path for heritage preservation and ensure to hand over the community's cultural legacy to the coming generations. Involvement of the Government organizations and active participation of the Community members can safeguard the Intangible cultural heritage of the Indigenous communities.

⁸ *Bheting* – means Meeting

⁹ *Jangubai*- The local Goddess of the Gonds. Jatara takes place at the Jangubai Cave

¹⁰ *Bodem pen* – The Deity worshiped and Jatara takes place after the Nagoba Jatara.

¹¹ *Sabha* – Assembly, the practice of conducting Sabha during Nagoba Jatara is a tradition continuing from the colonial times. Cristofer Hamindorf also mentioned about the event in his records.

Documentation of intangible cultural heritage practices of the gondos of Telangana: A case study of
Nagoba Jatara festival of the Raj Gondos

Image Courtesy: Lijin L., Project - Tangible and Intangible Heritage of Telangana, Department of Design,
Indian Institute of Technology, Hyderabad

References

- Avcikurt, C., Dinu, M. S., Hacio, N., Recep, L. U., Abdullah, E. F. E., & Nuray, S. (n.d.). *Global Issues and Trends in Tourism*.
- Baligh, H. H. (1998). *The fit between the organization structure and its cultural setting: aspects of Islamic cultures*. 7, 39–49.
- Bhukya, B. (2008). The mapping of the Adivasi social: Colonial anthropology and Adivasis. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43(39), 103–109.
- José, M., Devesa, M., & César, L. (2012). *City, Culture and Society Evaluating intangible cultural heritage: The case of cultural festivals q. 3*, 235–244. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2012.09.002>
- Pandey, J. (n.d.). *A Study on Socio-Cultural Change of Tribal Community in Telangana*.
- Vecco, M. (2010). A definition of cultural heritage: From the tangible to the intangible. *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, 11(3), 321–325. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.culher.2010.01.006>
- Blake, J. (2008). UNESCO's 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage: the implications of community involvement in 'safeguarding'. In *Intangible heritage* (pp. 59-87). Routledge.
- Bhukya, Bhagya (2017). *The roots of the periphery: A history of the Gondos of Deccan India*. Oxford University Press
- Salunke, S. B. (2014). *Case Study of Keslapur Nagoba Jatra or Fair : A Socio- Anthropological approach*. 2(4), 1046–1051.
- Talluru, V. (2018). Gond Festival; the Ritual Theatre. *International Journal of Advanced Research*, 6(11), 480–484. <https://doi.org/10.21474/ijar01/8020>