

## **SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF GOND COMMUNITY OF ADILABAD DISTRICT IN TELANGANA**

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### **Abstract**

*The Gond community in Adilabad district, Telangana, represents a unique indigenous group with a rich cultural heritage and a distinctive social structure. This community, spread across central and south-central India, practices ancestor worship and reveres clan and village deities, shaping their social organization and traditional beliefs. The Gonds are known for their exogamous **patrilineal** groupings, such as **sagas**, and the role of hereditary figures like the **devari** in mediating between the community and local deities. The Gond society values lineage, with clan names passed down patrilineally, and maintains traditions that emphasize family and community ties. This abstract highlights the intricate social fabric and cultural practices of the Gond community in Adilabad district, showcasing their enduring traditions and interconnected way of life.*

**Keywords:** Gond community, Social structure, Family, Clan, Caste, Gender roles, Rituals, Ancestor worship, Deity worship, Lineage, Marriage practices, Social organization, Cultural practices

### **Introduction**

The Gond are a group of indigenous people who live in central and south-central India and are now formally recognised as Scheduled Tribes. Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, and Odisha are the states where they reside. The majority speak Gondi, a Dravidian language with many different and, to some extent, mutually incomprehensible dialects. Some Gonds no longer speak their native tongue and instead speak **Hindi**, **Marathi**, or **Telugu**, depending on which is more widely spoken where they live.

Although all Gond peoples practice ancestor worship and the worship of clan and village deities, there is no cultural homogeneity among the Gond.

The Raj Gond, who once possessed a complex feudal organisation, are the most advanced. Local rajas who were related to a royal house through blood or marriage ruled over groupings of villages. Settlements used to be somewhat transient, with the exception of the fortified rajas' residences; farming, especially when done with ploughs and oxen, required routine field shifting and the clearance of fresh swaths of forest land. The Raj Gond continue to survive outside of the **Hindu** caste system, refusing to acknowledge **Brahman** dominance or feel constrained by Hindu laws like the prohibition against murdering cows.

The exogamous **patrilineal** groupings of the Gond society are referred to as sagas. There are two Gonds in the Madhya Pradesh highlands and two in the northern Nagpur plain, while there are four in the southern Nagpur plain and Adilabad. These sagas are known in Adilabad by the names **Yerwen**, **Sarwen**, **Siwen**, and **Nalwen**, which each refer to the number

of ancestors for that particular saga. The *Sarpe saga*, which is connected to *Sarwen* for marriage purposes despite having different origin myths, is the fifth saga in Adilabad. Each *saga* first resided in a one *hamlet*, but soon left and built their own villages, according to Gond mythology. These ancestral settlements' names have been retained in tradition, and they occasionally correspond to actual places. Each saga's number of ancestors serves as a symbol for that saga, and on many ceremonial and ritual occasions, the quantity of participating animals, people, acts, or items is a direct reflection of the saga's number.<sup>1</sup>

The story mostly lives in the realm of ritual and has no significant political or organisational impact. The worship of *Persa Pen*, however mostly at the clan level, is the most obvious indication of saga awareness. Since all followers of the same Persa pen believe they are agnatically related, intermarrying or engaging in sexual activity with one another is prohibited. Sagas whose members Gonds can marry are referred to as *soira*.

Every tale is thought to carry out tasks that are crucial to society as a whole. The story has a significant part in determining roles in ceremonial and ritual activities. For instance, when a clan worships its *Persa pen*, the clan priest performs the sacrifice while two members of the clan's *soira saga* dress the idol and prepare the sacrificed meal. Participants in several Gond festival events are divided into *saga or soira*. Members of each saga are seated individually and fed the sacrificed supper at *Persa Pen* in the order that their ancestors are said to have emerged from the cave in each tale's origin story. In Gond society, however, every narrative is treated equally. Each saga's members cooperate with one another on matters that have an impact on their relationships with other sagas, such as discussions on bride prices in marriage. Additionally, anyone can be replaced for ceremonial reasons by someone from the same generation, age, and saga. Therefore, a couple from the same saga as the bride can substitute for the bride's parents in the rite in situations where the bride's parents, for example, are not present. This also holds true for *Gond-Pardhan* relationships: in the event that a Pardhan from the same clan cannot be located, a *Pardhan* from a different clan in the same story may be introduced as a suitable replacement.

The *pari*, or *clan*, the primary organisational unit of Gond culture, is divided in the saga. The number of ancestors in a given saga determines the number of clans in that saga. In the Gond creation tale, the clans in a saga are organised according to when they emerged from the *cave*. For example, during the First *Fruit festival*, all members of a saga eat at the seniormost member of the seniormost *pari* of the saga represented in the village. This precedence regulates behaviour throughout several rites. Senior and junior *pari* relationships are based on those between elder and younger brothers. For instance, it is forbidden for senior *pari* members to wed a junior *pari* widow because doing so would be comparable to an older

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<sup>1</sup> Von Fürer-Haimendorf, Christoph (1956). "The Descent Group System of the Raj Gonds". *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London. 18 (3): 499–511. Doi: 10.1017/S0041977X0008798X. ISSN 0041-977X. JSTOR 610113. S2CID 178498123.

brother wedging a younger brother's wife. Clan names frequently refer to particular flora. The words *Tekam*, *Uikey*, *Markam*, *Dhurwe*, and *Atram* are examples of common *pari*.

There are multiple *parallel lineages* called *kita* that make up each clan. Each of these *kita* serves a particular ritual purpose in Gond society; for example, the *katorakita* is the *sole kita* in charge of *Persa Pen* worship. Some clans of *Kita* use Maratha titles like Deshmukh, which were given to specific Gond chiefs. Only the ritual sphere is where the *kita* is used. The *khandan*, or *subclans*, that are occasionally created are often organic in character. Each *khandan*, which is akin to a mini-clan in that it has its own collection of ritual objects for *Persa Pen* worship, is created when members of a *pari*, including a *katora*, decide to establish a new location for *Persa Pen* worship. This group eventually fuses together to form a *khandan*.

In most cases when the villagers participate in a ritual project, it is he who serves as their spokesperson and a liaison between the community and the local deities.) *Devari*, the priest in charge of the cult of the village gods.

In a freshly established hamlet, the *devari* is typically chosen from among the householders, and upon his death, his son or a close agnatic kinsman succeeds him.)

However, there are instances where the choice of the priest does not belong to the villagers, even in a brand-new community. Because in certain places a family with a long history of involvement in the worship of the local deities has the right to provide the priest for the seasonal rites of any group of people moving into their parish. Typically, a hereditary *devari* who conducts annual rituals in honour of neighbourhood gods for the benefit of all communities is a *Kolam* rather than a Gond, and it is significant that the Gonds refer to *Kolams* as *Pujaris*.

The hereditary *devari* of the local deities in *Madura* village, the seat of an *Atram* raja, is a Kolam living in the Kolam town of *Pangri Madura*, which is located around five kilometres away from the Gond village. I have detailed this in some length in *The Raj Gonds of Adilabad* (p. 71). In the *PeddaVagu valley*, a Kolam serves as the *devari* for the three villages of *Padra*, *Dhanora*, and *Goigaon*, and another Kolam serves as the priest for the villages of *Indhani*, *Lendiguda*, *Mokashiguda*, and *Kotaguda*.

It would be difficult for a group of colonists to avoid using the services of a hereditary *devari* in such a region, and it would surely be perilous to attempt to disrupt the established bond between the local deities and their customary priest.

While the cult of the local gods has remained in the hands of Kolam priests in regions where Kolams are still seen as the older people, in most Gond villages the status of *devari* is hereditary. In the lineage of the village founder or a co-founder who was initially given the priestly position.

Under 10 percent of villages likely combine the roles of headman and priest, and the farther back the foundation is, the less likely it is that both positions are still held by descendants of the same family. A *devari*'s son will only be prevented from taking over his

father's priestly duties if he is plainly unfit, it would appear, than when it comes to the appointment of a successor to a village priest than when it comes to the succession to the headmanship. However, according to the majority of Gonds, the *devari* is appointed by the village panch and is subject to dismissal for behaviour unbecoming a priest. The panch will then choose a new devari to succeed him in this situation.<sup>2</sup>

Devari are rarely fired, however there was a specific instance in *ChudurKoinur* many years ago when the *devariKumra Maru* was removed and made to leave the hamlet with his young son. He was believed to have prayed to the Village Mother to have some particular residents killed. Nevertheless, despite the gravity of this accusation, his own younger brother Somu took over and served in that capacity for fifteen years. However, *Somu*, who had become old and virtually blind, ran afoul of the locals in 1952 and departed *ChudurKoinur* after a dispute. His son's kid, a young child of about twelve years old, who was unable to carry out the rites on his own and required the assistance of older men, succeeded him.

No man of a different clan and lineage is likely to be a candidate for the priesthood as long as there is any male member of the dismissed devari's lineage in the village. According to the very well-established position of one particular *Kolam devari*, it also seems that the devari is not so much the village's representative on religious matters as he is the man predestined to act as a mediator between himself and the local deities, whose services are beneficial to all residents of the locality in question. The foundation of the entire devari, institution, and a change outside of the circle of the same lineage, would go against this fundamental conception, is the notion that by long association, the devari is in a particularly advantageous position to control the with a supernatural forces linked special region.patla is the centre of village life and in many instances a very real leader. The Gondi term patla is clearly derived from the Hindi (Urdu, Marathi) term

### **Social Aspects of Gonds**

The Gonds' social institutions have been studied in relation to their functional elements, which have both vertical and horizontal dimensions.

The important grouping of individuals is the main concern of the social organisation. Traditionally; social structure has been equated with social organisation. The Gond population was enormous and dispersed extensively. It was broken up into several sections, each of which had a unique nature. These parts, which were often endogamous, were made up of clans that were organised into exogamous *phratries*.

The smallest social group was the family. The Gond family was a monolithic social group made up primarily of parents and their male and female children. The family only included daughters who were still single. However, in recent years, the joint family system

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<sup>2</sup> K. Gough, "The origin of the family," Journal of Marriage and the family, 1971, vol. 33, no. 4, pp.

has been rapidly replaced by the individual family system. The Gonds' term for their collective was "*pari*." The clan among the Gonds was a monolithic group made up of relatives who share the same clan name. Clan members thought they shared an ancestor and were therefore related. Due to the *patrilineal nature* of the clan, a man passes on his clan name to his offspring. Until she was married, a woman used the clan name of her father. However, a married lady was not considered to be a part of her father's clan. Only the male gender immediately adopts the patronymic at birth, maintains it until death, and passes it on to his offspring. It is an enduring aspect of the Gond society.

### **Social Division of Gond Society**

The Gonds were divided into various social classes and castes, each with their own names. A person was believed to belong to the class or caste of his or her father as membership in both was decided by birth.

In light of caste organisation, the Gond tribe's *segmental* characteristics have significantly diminished. The Gonds today fiercely assert that their status is equivalent to that of the nation's higher castes and have a very high regard for caste. With other ethnic groups, they also follow the social distance and commensality guidelines<sup>3</sup>.

### **Position of Gond Women**

In a Gond traditional community, a woman's position was essentially equal to that of the other sexes. She shared all work, including providing for her family, in her marriage while living side by side with the male. She was the centre of most of the household labour. She took care of the kids, raised cattle, and prepared meals for the family. The husband sought his wife's opinion on all significant family matters and frequently respected it.<sup>4</sup> Female participation in several ritual observances was prohibited. Despite this, the Gond woman had a respected position in society because she was crucial to both the reproductive and manufacturing processes.<sup>5</sup>

In primitive communities usually men and women are equal. However, given the current state of globalisation, her position is eroding.

### **Conclusion**

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<sup>3</sup> S. Fuchs, *Gond and Bhumia of Eastern Mandla*, Mumbai: AsiaPublishing House, 1960, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> V. Elwin, *A New deal for Tribal India*, London: Ministry of HomeAffairs, Government of India, 1963, p. 6

<sup>5</sup> L. Dube, "*The Gond women*," Ph.D. Dissertation, Nagpur UniversityLibrary, Nagpur, 1949, p. 34 The Raj Gonds of Adilabad.



The Gond community in Adilabad district, Telangana, exhibits a rich cultural heritage and a unique social structure. The Gonds have a strong sense of identity rooted in their language, cultural practices, and traditional beliefs. Their social organization is characterized by clans, phratries, and hereditary roles such as the devari, who acts as a mediator between the community and local deities.

Ancestor worship and the worship of clan and village deities are integral to the Gond social structure, shaping relationships within the community and guiding ceremonial and ritual activities. The Gond society values lineage, with clan names passed down patrilineally, and maintains traditions that emphasize the importance of family and community ties.

Overall, the Gond community in Adilabad district exemplifies a vibrant and interconnected social fabric, where cultural traditions, religious practices, and social norms converge to create a distinct and enduring way of life.

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