



Decentralization and Tribal Self-Governance in South Asia: The Banjara Experience From Telangana State

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Abstracts: Decentralization in India, institutionalized through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, was envisioned to deepen democracy and empower marginalized communities through grassroots self-governance. In Telangana, the newest state of India, the idea of decentralization found a unique expression through the Telangana Panchayati Raj Act of 2018. This law gave independent Gram Panchayat status to more than 2,600 Banjara Thandas, which are traditional tribal settlements. The paper explores how this change has influenced local governance, social identity, and the participation of the Banjara community in village decision-making and development activities. Drawing on qualitative field research across the districts of Adilabad, Khammam, Medak, Nizamabad, and Warangal, the study combines interviews with elected representatives, Naiks, women leaders, and community activists with field observations and policy analysis. The study found significant improvement in education, greater participation of women in local governance, and improved access to essential services, along with a visible drop in poverty levels. However, some issues still persist, especially in terms of financial independence, administrative efficiency and the need to balance traditional tribal systems with modern governance structures. The paper concludes that Telangana's experience shows decentralization is effective only when governance reforms are grounded in local cultural contexts and give people a real voice in decision-making. This approach provides useful lessons for building inclusive tribal governance and strengthening democratic participation across South Asia

Keywords: Banjara Community; Decentralization; Telangana Panchayati Raj Act 2018; Tribal Governance; Participatory Democracy; Cultural Autonomy; Inclusive Development; South Asia

1. Introduction

Decentralization in India represents one of the most significant political and administrative developments in the country's post-independence history. Conceived as a instrument to deepen democracy and promote inclusive participation, decentralization was designed to transfer authority, responsibility and financial resources from central and state governments to elected local institutions. This vision was constitutionally realized through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, which institutionalized the Panchayati Raj system as the three-tier of federal structure of democratic governance. The amendment translated India's commitment to participatory democracy into a framework for rural self-government that could bridge the gap between citizens and the state while empowering marginalized social groups through representation, accountability and local planning (Mathew, 1994; Singh, 2004).

The 73rd Amendment introduced a three-tier Panchayati Raj structure Gram Panchayat at the village level with mandatory elections every five years and a clear distribution of responsibilities under the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution. It mandated that reservations of seats and leadership positions be reserved for Scheduled Castes , Scheduled Tribes and women, so that communities that were often left out of politics could take part in decision-making (Mathew, 1994). However, the way this system has been put into practice has not been the same everywhere in India. Some states institutionalized participatory systems effectively, while others retained bureaucratic dominance, resulting in limited fiscal autonomy and community involvement (Pattnaik, 2015). In tribal areas, these challenge the situation is more complicated democratic institutions and ongoing customary systems of governance, creating a complex interface between state law and indigenous authority (Xaxa, 2016).

Telangana, formed on 2 June 2014 after decades of regional mobilization, provides a distinctive context for understanding these dynamics. Emerging as India's 29th and youngest state, carved out from the northwestern districts of the former Andhra Pradesh, Telangana's creation was both a political and developmental assertion of regional identity. The state has a varied social and economic setup that includes big industrial cities like Hyderabad and Rangareddy, farming areas in Medak and Nizamabad, and forest-covered tribal regions in Adilabad, Khammam, and Warangal (Government of Telangana, 2020). According to the 2011 Census, Telangana's total population is approximately 35.1 million, of which 9.08% belong

to Scheduled Tribes. The tribal population includes Gonds, Koyas, Kolams, Thotis and most prominently, the Banjaras (also known as Lambadas).

As India's youngest state, Telangana positioned decentralization at the core of its governance strategy. Strengthening local institutions was seen as essential for equitable resource distribution, participatory planning, and accountable administration. Within this framework, the Telangana Panchayati Raj Act of 2018 became a major turning point. The law increased the number of Gram Panchayats by giving official recognition to many long-neglected tribal settlements, especially the Banjara Thandas, as separate administrative villages. This policy innovation represented a major step toward integrating tribal settlements into the democratic structure without undermining their cultural autonomy (Government of Telangana, 2018; Sharma & Reddy, 2021).

The Banjaras, or Lambadas, form one of India's largest tribal and semi-tribal groups, with an estimated national population of around 12 crore. They are spread across multiple states Rajasthan (SBC), Maharashtra (Vimukta Jati), Karnataka (SC), Telangana (ST), Andhra Pradesh (ST), Madhya Pradesh (OBC), and Uttar Pradesh (OBC) each with differing constitutional classifications that reflect local political histories (Kharat, 2007; Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2023). In Telangana, the Banjara (also known as Lambadi) population is recorded as 2.13 million, forming nearly half of the state's total Scheduled Tribe population and residing mainly in Thanda settlements across the districts of Adilabad, Khammam, Nizamabad, Medak and Warangal, at the national level, the total Banjara population stands at 121 million, reflecting their wide distribution across several Indian states (Government of Telangana, 2023).

Historically, the Banjaras were nomadic and worked as traders, transporting salt, grain and forest produced items throughout India. Their travel and trading activities were critical in supporting local markets and connecting regions prior to the development of modern transportation infrastructure (Haimendorf, 1982; Singh, 1998). Villages, taking up farming as their main work. Each Thanda, or traditional Banjara village, functioned as both a home and a local governing space, where people lived closely together, made decisions through family ties, and were guided by Naiks hereditary leaders who maintained peace and followed community traditions (Reddy, 2015). Thandas represented both economic cooperation and strong cultural unity, helping the community maintain its shared identity through festivals, storytelling, and traditional practices.

However, the colonial period disrupted these traditional systems. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 classified several nomadic groups, including the Banjaras, as “criminals” resulting in harsh government supervision and social discrimination (Nigam, 2020). Even after independence, the shame and economic difficulties persisted, making it impossible for many Thanda’s to obtain official recognition in the government system. Prior to 2018, most Thanda’s in Telangana were officially classified as sub-units of bigger non-tribal villages, depriving them of direct representation, fiscal transfers and decision-making capacity (Prasad, 2019; Pattnaik 2015).

The Telangana Panchayati Raj Act of 2018 sought to rectify this historical imbalance by granting Gram Panchayat status to over 1,281 Thanda’s across the state (Government of Telangana, 2018). This recognition provided political legitimacy, fiscal support and administrative autonomy to Banjara communities, enabling them to elect their own leaders and plan local development programs. Symbolically, it also marked an official acknowledgment of the Banjaras cultural identity within the democratic framework. The reform thus reflected a dual objective to strengthen grassroots democracy and to respect the distinctiveness of tribal institutions.

Decentralization in Telangana therefore operates as both a democratic reform and a process of cultural negotiation. This reform examines outdated power structures and assesses how well established institutions can adapt to contemporary ones, even as it enhances local self-government. A hybrid form of government that blends contemporary administrative techniques with enduring community customs has been established by the presence of both elected Panchayats and traditional Naik leaders.

This situation raises important questions Can official institutions and traditional leadership work together peacefully? Does including local systems in government help protect or weaken cultural traditions? And how do community members understand and respond to these changes?

These questions frame the analytical focus of the present study, which views decentralization as both an instrument of empowerment and a site of contestation. The rationale for this research emerges from three key gaps in the existing literature. First, while decentralization and tribal governance have been extensively studied in India (Mathew, 1994; Singh, 2004; Pattnaik, 2015; Xaxa, 2016), little attention has been given to newly formed states like Telangana, which are experimenting with innovative governance models. Second, most analyses of tribal inclusion are

limited to Scheduled Areas governed under the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996 (PESA), whereas Telangana's 2018 reform extends beyond PESA's framework. Third, empirical studies focusing on the lived experiences of tribal communities especially Banjaras under decentralization remain scarce.

This paper addresses these gaps by looking at how the Telangana Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Act of 2018 has changed governance, identity, and engagement among Banjara Thanda's. Field interviews, community observations, and secondary data are used to investigate the relationship between institutional reform and cultural preservation. The study argues that Telangana's model demonstrates how decentralization can succeed only when institutional innovation is anchored in cultural recognition and community agency. The analysis provides larger insights for participatory democracy and inclusive tribal government throughout South Asia, highlighting the necessity of striking a balance between administrative effectiveness and cultural variety preservation in order to advance democracy in multicultural society.

2. Historical and Cultural Background of Thanda's : A Review of Scholarly Perspectives

The history of the Banjara community is closely linked with India's social and cultural development. Known as Lambada's or Gor Banjaras in different regions, they have long been one of the most mobile and widespread communities in South Asia. Their customs, way of life, and community practices show a long history of travel, adjustment, and strength that still shapes who they are today. In Telangana, this heritage is seen in the Thanda the traditional Banjara village that acts as both a cultural center and a local unit of governance. Understanding how Thanda's developed over time helps explain the background of Telangana's current decentralization reforms and their roots in community life.

Historical and ethnographic studies trace the Banjaras' early origins to the northwestern regions of India, particularly Rajasthan and Punjab, from where they gradually moved southward over several centuries (Singh, 1998). Evidence from language and culture, especially the Lambadi dialect that mixes Rajasthani, Gujarati, and Hindi, shows that their migration followed the major trade routes of medieval India. The Banjaras worked as traders and carriers of salt, grain, and forest products, linking villages, forest communities and growing towns (Haimendorf, 1982). Their caravans, often made up of hundreds of bullocks, were vital to regional economies

and even supported the Mughal and Maratha empires. Duarte Barbosa, writing in the early sixteenth century, described them as “the carriers of India” showing their importance to trade and travel (Reddy, 2015).

As they moved across regions, the Banjaras developed a social system based on kinship and mutual trust. Their families, known as *gotras*, followed rules that required marriage outside their own clan. Each group was led by a hereditary elder called the Naik, who helped settle disputes and guided the community by discussion and agreement rather than force, showing a cooperative way of leadership (Singh, 1998).

The Thanda grew naturally from this traveling lifestyle. In the beginning, a Thanda was simply a resting place for traveling traders. As trade activities reduced and people started settling down, these places slowly became small permanent villages. In the dry and forested regions of Telangana, Thandas became part of the local farming areas (Haimendorf, 1982). Each Thanda is generally built a short distance from the main village, showing that it is both self-contained and connected to nearby areas. The houses, made from mud and thatch, are grouped closely together and face an open area in the middle. At the center is the Naik’s house, often decorated with simple wall paintings of animals or deities. Near it lies the *chaupal*, the public space where people meet to discuss issues, settle conflicts, or organize festivals. This layout shows how the Thanda functions as both a social and governance unit (Reddy, 2015).

Life inside a Thanda revolves around community rituals and seasonal festivals that express unity and shared identity. One of the most important is Sevalal Jayanthi, which honors Sevalal Maharaj, the community’s spiritual leader. The event blends elements of Hindu and folk traditions and represents the Banjaras’ ability to maintain their culture while adapting to change (Haimendorf, 1982; Reddy, 2015). The Thanda is also the main space for the Lambadi language, songs, and oral stories. Women play a key role in keeping these traditions alive through embroidery, music, and dance. In this way, each Thanda serves as a living record of Banjara life—combining livelihood, culture, and local governance.

The arrival of British colonial rule changed this world dramatically. With the spread of railways and new trading systems, the Banjaras’ traditional occupation as transporters collapsed. The situation worsened when the British passed the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which branded several nomadic groups, including the Banjaras, as “criminal tribes.” An whole society became social outcasts as a result of this law,

which gave local authorities the authority to monitor these groups and impose travel restrictions (Nigam, 2020). Additionally, the Act disrupted their networks of travel, confiscated cattle, and weakened traditional leadership (Rao, 2019). British officials often saw the Banjaras' self-governing Naik system as a challenge to colonial control, leading to the forced relocation and breaking up of many Thandas (Pattnaik, 2015).

Although the law was repealed in 1952, the damage to social identity lasted for generations. The stigma of "criminality" continued to influence how society and the state treated the Banjaras. Even in independent India, their official status has differed from state to state recognized as Scheduled Tribes in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, Scheduled Castes in Karnataka, and Other Backward Classes in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh showing how the old colonial labels still shape modern classifications (Xaxa, 2016).

After independence, changes in land policies and modern development encouraged the Banjaras to give up their nomadic lifestyle and live in one place. As forests and trade came under government control, they started farming small pieces of land, keeping animals, and taking up daily wage work. Even with this change to a settled life, the traditional leadership system of the Thanda stayed strong. The Naik continued to act as a guide, mediator and link between the community and government officials. This role gained new relevance when the Thandas were granted Gram Panchayat status under the Telangana Panchayati Raj Act, 2018, allowing traditional leaders and elected representatives to coexist (Reddy, 2015; Prasad, 2019).

The Naik and other community leaders continue to help with dispute resolution, celebration planning, and public welfare. A democratic form of government that precedes modern municipal governments, the chaupal remains an open forum where people congregate to discuss issues and make choices as a group. Murals of bullocks, caravans, and deities on house walls, along with temples dedicated to Sevalal Maharaj, act as symbols of continuity and collective memory.

In recent decades, Thanda's have also become centers of new leadership. Younger members of the community, especially women, are now active in education, self-help groups, and village politics. These modifications show how the Banjaras are using their cultural identity as a basis for advancement while balancing their customs with new opportunities (Reddy, 2015; Prasad 2019).

The transformation of Thandas from nomadic camps into self-governing villages reflects the Banjaras' broader journey from mobility to social and political participation. The Banjaras have maintained their cohesiveness and traditional

leadership despite the impact of modern changes and government regulations on their way of life and work. In Telangana's decentralization process, the Naik's sustained position and the Thanda's strong sense of cultural identity show that old political systems can adapt to and coexist with modern democratic ones.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Understanding the transformation of Banjara Thanda's into Gram Panchayats under the Telangana Panchayati Raj Act, 2018 requires an approach that connects theories of participatory governance with the idea of cultural autonomy. Together, these perspectives help explain how democratic reforms function within societies that already have their own systems of community rule. The process of decentralization in tribal areas such as Telangana is not just about transferring power to the local level it is also about negotiating between state-led structures and long-standing cultural traditions. This section explains the theoretical foundation, research design, fieldwork methods, and ethical considerations that guide this study.

The theoretical base of this research lies in the framework of participatory governance, which emphasizes the importance of citizen involvement as an essential part of democracy. Researchers such as Cornwall and Gaventa (2001) and Fung and Wright (2003) explain that participation is meaningful only when people especially those from disadvantaged groups can genuinely influence the decisions that shape their lives. Participatory governance is both a way of practicing politics and organizing institutions; it aims to share power more fairly, make leaders answerable to the people, and encourage active involvement in democracy beyond just voting. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992) in India gave shape to these ideas through the Panchayati Raj system, which was meant to bring governance closer to people in rural areas (Mathew, 1994; Singh, 2004). However this system can work well only when it matches the cultural practices and social conditions of the communities it is designed to empower. For tribal populations, this means that participation must move beyond simple representation in elections to include indigenous methods of decision-making and self-rule (Pattnaik, 2015).

The recognition of Banjara Thanda's as independent Gram Panchayats in Telangana is an example of how participatory governance theory can be applied in real life. By giving administrative and financial powers to these settlements, the 2018 amendment aimed to turn long-marginalized groups into active participants in governance. However, this process depends heavily on how newly formed

institutions interact with traditional leadership especially the role of the Naik, the hereditary elder who continues to hold moral and social authority in the Thanda. This interaction creates a hybrid democratic landscape in which formal government institutions coexist with traditional behaviors. In this regard, participatory government in tribal areas such as Telangana must be viewed as a flexible and culturally rooted process rather than a rigid model of decentralization.

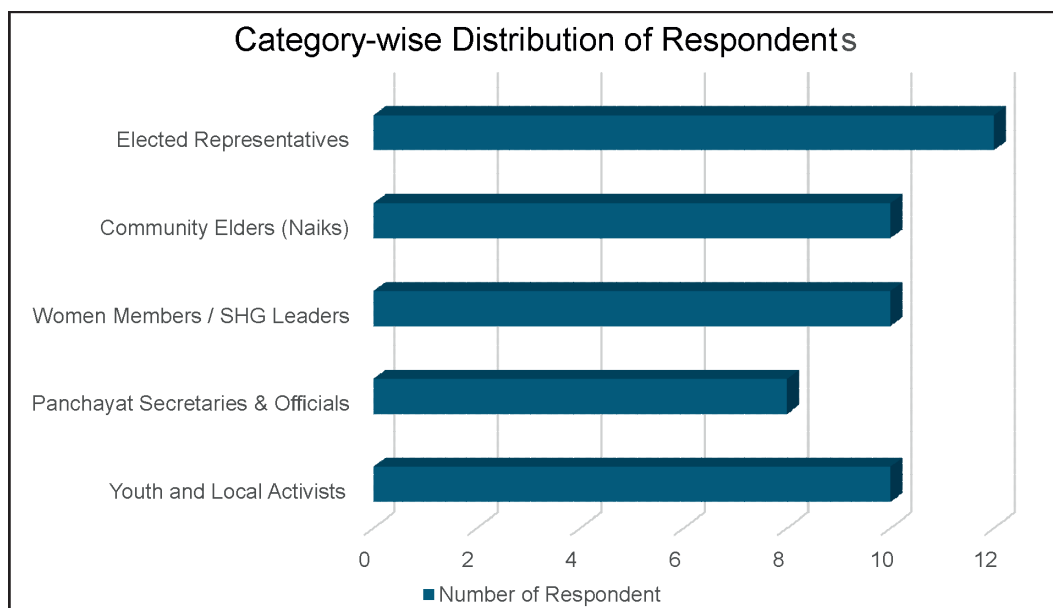
To complement the participatory governance perspective, this study also draws from the idea of cultural autonomy (Parekh, 2000; Xaxa, 2016). This concept stresses the right of communities to maintain their customs, traditions and systems of self-regulation within modern state structures. Instead, it suggests that democracy becomes stronger when it respects and includes different cultures and ways of life. For the Banjaras, cultural autonomy is seen in the continued importance of Thandas as social and political centers where traditional customs, rituals, and community decision-making still play a key role in daily life. Even after the formal inclusion of Thandas in the Panchayati Raj framework, they retain internal systems of leadership and collective discussion led by Naiks (Haimendorf, 1982; Reddy, 2015).

When the principles of participatory governance and cultural autonomy are viewed together, they offer a deeper understanding of how Thanda's function as hybrid political spaces both administrative and cultural. This perspective allows the study to examine how state-led reforms influence community identity and local power relations without erasing traditional structures. It also explains how indigenous leadership and formal institutions can coexist, sometimes blending and sometimes negotiating, within the same governance system.

The research follows a qualitative interpretive design to understand how these changes are experienced by the Banjara community. Qualitative research is particularly effective in exploring cultural meanings and social relationships that cannot be easily measured through numbers. It focuses on how people make sense of governance reforms in their daily lives and how participation and representation are understood in practice.

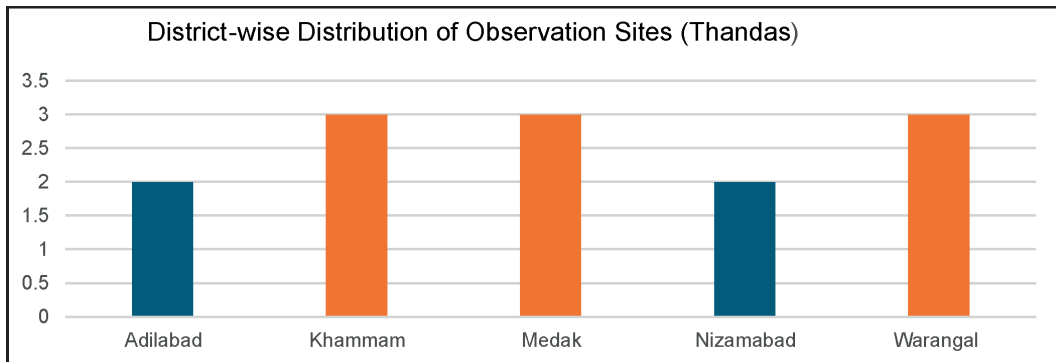
Fieldwork for this study was carried five key districts of Telangana Adilabad, Khammam, Medak, Nizamabad, and Warangal. These districts have been chosen because they represent the Banjara population's cultural diversity as well as various phases of the Panchayati Raj system's administrative growth. When taken as a whole, they offer a thorough understanding of how decentralization strategies function in various socioeconomic contexts.

Primary data was collected through 50 semi-structured interviews and 13 community-level observations in selected Thandas. Respondents included a range of participants elected representatives such as Sarpanches and ZPTC/MPTC members, Naiks and community elders, women leaders from self-help groups, youth activists, and Panchayat officials. Both local and institutional viewpoints were represented because to this combination. Observations made during public gatherings and community meetings also shed light on the decision-making process and the interactions between contemporary and traditional governance methods in day to day operations.



A thematic approach to data analysis was used to find recurrent themes and concepts in field notes and interviews. Four major themes emerged female inclusion, socioeconomic transformation, political representation, and cultural continuity. A comparative lens was used to interpret the to analyze patterns of similarity and variations among the five districts.

In addition, 13 community observations were conducted across selected Thanda's distributed across districts: Adilabad (2), Khammam (3), Medak (3), Nizamabad (2), and Warangal (3). These sites were chosen to capture variation in socio-economic status, access to services, and cultural practices.



This integrated theoretical and methodological framework provides a solid foundation for investigating how decentralization changes have altered government, representation and cultural identity in the Banjaras. It places the Telangana experience within the larger South Asian discussions on participatory democracy and indigenous self-governance, showing how new forms of local administration can work alongside traditional cultural practices to build a more inclusive system of local government.

4. Governance Reforms and Decentralization in Telangana

The formation of Telangana in 2014 marked a major turning point in India's federal and democratic history. As the 29th state, Telangana emerged after decades of regional movements that demanded self-governance, administrative justice and equitable development. The formation of the new state was not only a political success, but also an attempt to establish a new style of governance led by locals. From the beginning, Telangana's authorities considered decentralization as a key part of development, seeking to give more power to local communities and encourage equal growth through active public participation.

In this context, decentralization was a means of ensuring fair resource distribution as well as a sign of democratic legitimacy. One of the most important legislative initiatives in this regard is the Telangana Panchayati Raj Act of 2018. In addition to broadening the scope of local government, the Act aimed to address long-standing historical exclusions.

When Telangana was founded, it was tasked with both institution development and upholding social justice. The administrative structure inherited from undivided Andhra Pradesh was highly centralized, with limited possibility for local initiative.

To correct this, the state undertook a massive reorganization of its districts in 2016, increasing their number from 10 to 31 (later 33) and restructuring mandals and Gram Panchayats to improve administrative proximity and citizen participation (Government of Telangana, 2018). These reforms aimed to bring government closer to the people and to include groups such as Scheduled Tribes and rural poor who had been left outside formal governance. Recognizing the importance of tribal habitations like Thanda's and Gudems, the Telangana government pursued policies that combined local representation with cultural inclusion.

The Telangana Panchayati Raj Act, 2018, passed by the State Legislative Assembly in April 2018, was a landmark step in deepening democracy at the village level. Historically, Banjara Thanda's were attached to non-tribal Gram Panchayats, leaving them politically invisible and financially disadvantaged (Reddy, 2015). Despite constitutional guarantees for representation, they lacked platforms to plan or manage their own development. The 2018 amendment sought to address this by granting full Gram Panchayat status to more than 1,281 Thandas and Gudems across the state. Each was now entitled to elect its own Sarpanch and Ward Members, access funds directly under state and central schemes, and manage development projects independently (Government of Telangana, 2018).

The Act also mandated reservations for Scheduled Tribes, ensuring that political leadership could emerge from within the community itself (Sharma & Reddy, 2021). To improve their financial strength, Thanda Gram Panchayats started receiving funds directly from the 14th and 15th Finance Commissions, as well as from major government programs like MGNREGA and PMAY. To help new tribal leaders handle these responsibilities, the government organized training programs that focused on planning, budgeting and managing local development activities effectively. Additionally, a Village Development Index was introduced to monitor progress in sanitation, education, and health outcomes.

The administrative recognition of Thandas as autonomous Gram Panchayats carried deep implications for governance. For the first time, these tribal communities gained decision-making power and independent budgets. Local leaders were able to concentrate on the concerns of their own community, such as expanding access to potable water and assisting women's self-help organizations, thanks to their newfound independence. Many Banjara women were elected as Sarpanches as a result of the seats being reserved for women, particularly in districts like Khammam and Warangal. These women played key roles in carrying out major development

programs like Mission Bhagiratha, which provides safe drinking water, and Mission Kakatiya, which helps restore irrigation systems.

However, the transition was not without challenges. Many of the newly formed Gram Panchayats lacked proper office spaces, administrative staff, or technical capacity. Administrative delays resulted from the fact that in many instances, a single Panchayat Secretary oversaw several Thandas. As the two systems had to compromise on power and decision-making procedures, tensions also emerged between elected Panchayat delegates and traditional Naik leadership. However, formal recognition has a strong symbolic meaning. As one elder from Khammam observed during fieldwork, “For the first time, our Thanda has a nameboard and a budget this is what equality feels like.”

Comparing Telangana’s experience with the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 provides a broader perspective on tribal decentralization. While PESA was designed to empower tribal Gram Sabhas in Scheduled Areas by giving them control over natural resources and dispute resolution, its implementation has been uneven. In Odisha, for example, bureaucratic meddling has curtailed Gram Sabha autonomy, but in Madhya Pradesh, the overlap between traditional and statutory institutions has resulted in parallel systems of administration with hazy accountability (Kumar, 2019; Sundar, 2016). In Karnataka, the situation is different both administratively and socially. While several Banjara Thanda’s have been upgraded to independent Gram Panchayats particularly in northern districts such as Kalaburagi, Bidar, Ballari, and Vijayapura this change stems from administrative reorganization rather than cultural recognition. The Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act (1993) permits such upgrades based on population size and local revenue. However, since the Banjara community in Karnataka is listed as a Scheduled Caste (SC) and not a Scheduled Tribe (ST), the state’s decentralization approach mainly focuses on improving basic services and infrastructure rather than promoting tribal self-governance or cultural autonomy. Unlike Telangana’s 2018 reform, which explicitly linked decentralization to the maintenance of cultural autonomy, Karnataka policy framework views Thanda’s as administrative units rather than unique sociocultural entities. Nonetheless, the increasing political participation of Banjara representatives in municipal authorities demonstrates a progressive, community driven push for increased self-representation and acknowledgment.

Telangana’s approach, however, differs in its emphasis on cultural inclusion rather than territorial designation. Unlike PESA, which only applies to regions officially designated as Scheduled, the Telangana Act grants Thanda’s Gram Panchayat status

outside of scheduled zones. In doing so, it encourages self-government through cultural recognition rather than geographical limits. This marks a shift from territory-based inclusion to one based on social and cultural identity, supporting Xaxa's (2016) idea of "context-sensitive decentralization." Telangana has proved that decentralization can be more than just an administrative exercise, it can also be a culturally grounded democratic inclusion movement.

5. Findings and Analysis - The Banjara Experience in Telangana

The transformation of Thanda's into Gram Panchayats (GPs) under the Telangana Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Act, 2018 has significantly reshaped the governance, social and cultural structures of Banjara communities across the state. While the reform provided a uniform administrative framework, its effects varied by district due to differences in local economy, social awareness, leadership capacity, and institutional support. The following case studies from five key districts Adilabad, Khammam, Medak, Nizamabad, and Warangal highlight distinct aspects of decentralized governance: political representation, gender inclusion, youth engagement, education and cultural revival, and the coexistence of traditional and modern governance systems. Together, these cases illustrate how democratic reforms interact with local traditions and identities in Telangana's tribal heartlands.

In Adilabad, the recognition of Thanda's as independent Gram Panchayats has strengthened political participation, particularly among women. Numerous women were elected as Sarpanches and Ward Members in the new Thanda Panchayats in the district, which has a long tradition of tribal engagement. According to field research, women have been participating more actively in Panchayat meetings and local decision-making bodies since the 2019 elections. Many respondents stated that women are now actively engaged in Gram Sabhas and development programs, when they were previously primarily observers. The State Election Commission (Government of Telangana, 2023) reported that women's participation in Panchayat leadership roles grew by 40% between 2019 and 2023. There are still issues, though: a number of recently elected officials rely on family members or secretaries to handle administrative duties including digital reporting and budget management. Additionally, only a few Thanda's have well-equipped Panchayat offices with reliable internet access. Despite these limitations, the overall participation in village-level governance has expanded, with a marked rise in Gram Sabha attendance and community involvement in planning activities.

In Khammam, decentralization has had a profound impact on women's financial and social empowerment through Self-Help Groups (SHGs). After Thanda's were given Gram Panchayat status, women's SHGs became central to economic and community development. Groups across multiple Thanda's have accessed credit through programs under the Telangana State Rural Livelihood Mission (TSRLM), which helped them start small businesses and reduce dependency on private moneylenders. There are still issues, though a number of recently elected officials rely on family members or secretaries to handle administrative duties including digital reporting and budget management.

However, some challenges remain. Many newly elected members still depend on family members or clerical staff to manage administrative work such as online reporting and budgeting. In addition, only a few Thanda's have proper Panchayat offices with stable internet connections, which limits smooth governance and digital access. This instance demonstrates that although decentralization encourages involvement, ongoing coaching and training are necessary to convert economic agency into political voice.

In Medak, district offers insights into how youth engagement and infrastructure development can complement decentralized governance. In Thanda's that became Gram Panchayats after 2018, such as those in Chegunta and Kowdipally regions significant improvements were noted in rural infrastructure. Local councils constructed new Panchayat Bhavans, repaired roads, and installed solar powered streetlights. Water supply coverage increased from 55% to 80%, and sanitation coverage reached 95% by 2023. One of the most notable features of Medak transformation is youth involvement. Educated young members of the Banjara community have taken active roles in supporting e-governance platforms like Meeseva and Praja Palana, which facilitate online access to government services. Many older Naiks and elders now rely on younger volunteers for digital tasks creating an intergenerational partnership that bridges traditional leadership with new administrative tools. However, this digital dependency sometimes creates friction over authority and decision making. Even so, Medak's experience highlights the modernization of governance through local initiative and technological adoption without undermining cultural integrity.

In Nizamabad, the decentralized model has directly supported educational and cultural revival. After 2018, many Thanda Panchayats started using part of their budgets to upgrade schools, hire teachers, and introduce the Lambadi language

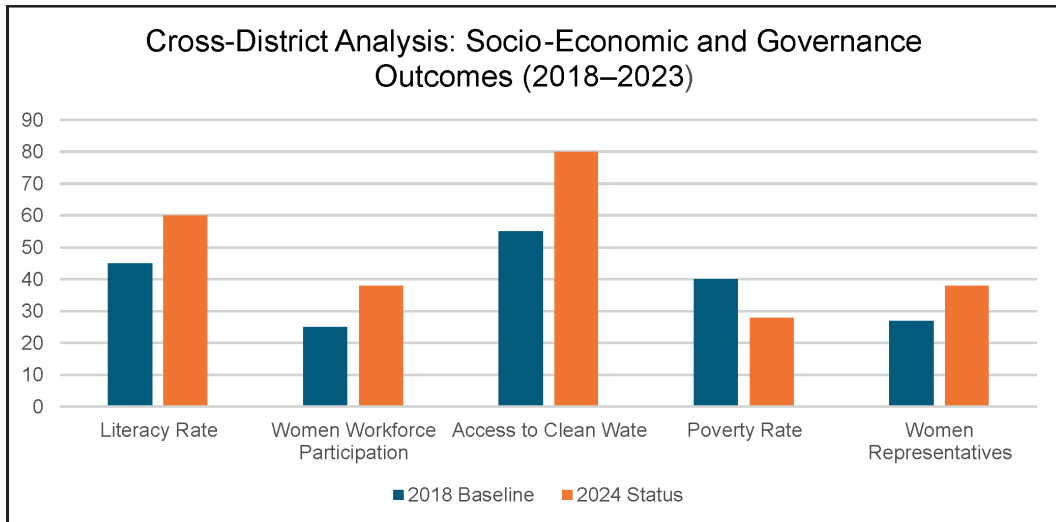
in primary education. Working together with the Department of Tribal Welfare, these efforts led to a 33% rise in literacy rates, with more girls attending school and greater community involvement in education related activities. Introducing Lambadi folktales, music, and stories into local school curricula has increased student engagement and fostered a sense of cultural pride. Activities like youth circles and Sevalal Jayanthi celebrations show that education becomes more meaningful when it connects with local culture and traditions. Although problems like teacher shortages and poor infrastructure remain, community involvement through local governance continues to improve learning outcomes and strengthen education in Thanda areas. Nizamabad provides an example of how local governance can unite education with cultural preservation, reinforcing both identity and literacy together.

The Warangal, this case demonstrates the potential for collaboration between contemporary municipal governance and traditional leadership. Both elected Panchayat members and Naik-led councils continue to function in Thanda's that are now Gram Panchayats. These traditional councils often work informally with local government leaders to manage community issues, resolve disputes, plan festivals and support social welfare activities. About 70% of Thanda families take part in celebrations like Sevalal Jayanti and Banjaramela, which have become important spaces for community interaction and civic participation. In a formal display of respect for local culture, panchayat offices frequently assist in planning these events by contributing funds from development projects. Traditional leadership and formal systems coexist in a mixed type of governance created by the coexistence of Naik councils and Gram Panchayats. Some younger members see these traditional meetings as slow or informal, but elders believe they are important for keeping respect, unity and cultural values alive. Warangal shows that when local governance respects culture it can support and strengthen traditional systems instead of replacing them.

The results of Telangana's decentralization policy show a common trend of development and adaptability in all five districts. The creation of Thanda Gram Panchayats has empowered women and young people, increased access to infrastructure and education and boosted political inclusion. However, enduring issues including disparities in administrative capability, restricted financial independence and cultural conciliation between elected and traditional authorities continue to influence the rate of transformation. All things considered, the Telangana experience shows that decentralization can produce a more inclusive,

context-specific type of democracy based on shared governance and community identity when it is planned with cultural sensitivity and local engagement.

Cross-District Analysis



A comparative analysis of the five selected districts Adilabad, Khammam, Medak, Nizamabad and Warangal indicates substantial socio-economic and governance improvements following the transformation of Thanda's into Gram Panchayats under the Telangana Panchayati Raj Act, 2018. The field data and secondary data show that literacy among the Banjara community has increased from 45% in 2018 to 60% in 2023 representing almost 33% improvement. This progress is closely linked to localized educational efforts, the introduction of Lambadi language instruction, and improved infrastructure supported by Gram Panchayats. Women's workforce participation also rose from 25% to 38% a 52% increase driven by the growing role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and targeted livelihood programs that have expanded economic opportunities for tribal women.

Similarly, access to clean drinking water improved from 55% to 80%, largely due to the successful implementation of Mission Bhagiratha in remote Thanda's. Poverty levels showed the notable decline from 40% in 2018 to 28% in 2023 reflecting the cumulative impact of decentralized on the welfare delivery and community managed income generation initiatives. These trends collectively underscore how administrative recognition and participatory governance have begun to yield measurable developmental outcomes for the Banjara community.

Despite these optimistic indicators, persisting problems continue to have an impact on the effectiveness of decentralization. Many Thanda Panchayats remain financially dependent on higher administrative levels, limiting their decision making authority. The sustainability of these reforms, therefore, depends on continued investment in capacity building, intergenerational leadership development and enhanced coordination between traditional Naik led institutions and statutory Panchayat bodies.

In synthesizing the evidence from these districts, the finding shows that Telangana decentralization model represents a significant step toward inclusive governance, yet one that requires deeper institutional consolidation. Thanda's provides a hybrid paradigm of self-rule that combines democratic involvement with cultural continuity. Strengthening this synergy is critical to ensuring that decentralization not only achieves developmental goals but also strengthens the cultural roots of tribal self-governance in Telangana.

6. Conclusion

The transformation of Banjara Thandas into statutory Gram Panchayats under the Telangana Panchayati Raj Act, 2018 has produced a multidimensional shift in local governance, social inclusion, and cultural politics. Field evidence from Adilabad, Khammam, Medak, Nizamabad and Warangal indicates measurable gains in political representation, socio-economic conditions, and cultural continuity. Between 2018 and 2023, literacy in the studied Thanda's rose from 45% to 60%, women's workforce participation increased from 25% to 38%, access to clean drinking water improved from 55% to 80%, and poverty rates declined from 40% to 28%. These outcomes reflect the combined effects of administrative recognition, targeted public programs (for example Mission Bhagiratha and Mission Kakatiya), the expansion of self-help groups and livelihood schemes, and locally driven education initiatives that incorporated Lambadi language and cultural content.

Political inclusion emerged as a key outcome of the reform. The constitution of independent Thanda Gram Panchayats created direct electoral channels for Banjaras who were earlier administratively subsumed under non-tribal villages. Elected representation increased markedly, with a substantial rise in women office holders following reservations for STs and women. Youth engagement also strengthened local governance through support in digital reporting, social auditing, and service-delivery monitoring. At the same time, customary authority embodied

in Naik leadership and Thanda Sabhas continues to play a central role in dispute resolution, festival organization, and social cohesion. The coexistence of Naik councils and elected Panchayats has given rise to a hybrid governance model in which customary legitimacy complements statutory authority, thereby producing a culturally embedded form of participatory democracy.

Despite these achievements, structural constraints limit the full realization of decentralized self-governance. Fiscal dependency on higher tiers of government, delayed fund disbursement, and insufficient administrative infrastructure constrain local planning and timely project execution. The coexistence of traditional and modern institutions, while largely beneficial, also generates tensions between elders who prioritize consultative decision-making and younger officials who emphasize procedural efficiency.

Viewed through the dual lenses of participatory governance and cultural autonomy, Telangana experience underscores two interrelated propositions. First, when institutional design is in line with local socioeconomic conditions, devolved authority leads to greater democratic engagement. The Thanda to Panchayat transition demonstrates how legal recognition, when combined with social mobilization and targeted programming, can turn neglected communities into active sites of political expression and development planning. Second, safeguarding cultural autonomy strengthens democratic legitimacy the survival and functional integration of Naik-led customary practices within formal Panchayat processes demonstrate that indigenous institutions can be partners rather than obstacles to effective local governance.

Policy implications flow directly from these findings. Fiscal devolution must be deepened and made more predictable to reduce dependency and allow Thanda Gram Panchayats to plan and implement development work effectively. Capacity-building programs should be expanded and tailored particularly for first time and women representatives to include practical modules on fund management, digital literacy, and participatory planning. By Incorporating the traditional discourses into formal government through the organized routes connecting Naik sabhas and Panchayat officials might help maintain cultural legitimacy and improve administrative transparency. Strengthening Panchayat offices and investing in digital infrastructure are equally important to ensure timely reporting, efficient functioning, and better access to services for all citizens. Finally, mentorship or inter- generational programs that pair traditional leaders with youth activists can foster knowledge transfer while maintaining cultural continuity.

The current analysis focuses on five districts and a short time period (2018-2023), capturing early and mid-term effects rather than long-term institutional trends. Some socioeconomic indicators are based on secondary sources and limited field data; greater generalization will benefit from larger-scale, mixed-methods, and longitudinal investigations. . Comparative research across states for instance with Karnataka, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Madhya Pradesh, where Banjara populations have different legal classifications and governance experiences would sharpen understanding of how constitutional categories and state policies shape outcomes.

In conclusion, the Telangana model serves as a strong example of how the decentralization can be adapted to respect the cultural diversity while promoting the democratic inclusion. Recognizing Thandas as Gram Panchayats has opened new pathways for political participation, improved public service delivery and strengthened the preservation of cultural identity. To consolidate these gains, policy attention must prioritize fiscal autonomy, capacity strengthening, and institutionalized collaboration between customary and statutory institutions. When decentralization is designed to be culturally sensitive and administratively enabling, it becomes more than a technique of administration: it evolves into a form of governance that amplifies voice, preserves identity and advances more equitable local development.

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