# Displacement, Disruption and Cultural Transformation of the Koya Tribe in Malkangiri (Odisha)

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***Abstract:*** The Koya tribes in Malkangiri because of land alienation lost their land and CPR due to involuntary displacement and became virtually bonded agricultural labourers of the Bengali refugees. The development paradigm pursued since independence has resulted in land alienation of tribes, aggravated their socioeconomic condition, and resulted in discontent among them. This is because the development paradigm, as conceived by the policymakers, has always been imposed on these communities, and therefore, it has remained insensitive to their needs and concerns, causing irreparable damage to these sections. Malkangiri District, the southernmost region of Odisha, remains one of the state's most underdeveloped areas due to historical neglect, challenging geography, and socio-political complexities. Home to indigenous communities like the Koya and resettled Bengali refugees, the district grapples with poor infrastructure, Maoist insurgency, and economic stagnation. Tribal traditions, land ownership disparities and financial constraints further shape local livelihoods. Despite resistance to modernization, historical struggles, including colonial uprisings, highlight the resilience of its people.

***Keywords:*** Malkangiri District, Tribal Communities, Underdevelopment, Infrastructure

## Introduction

The Scheduled Tribes, constituting approximately 8.6 per cent of the total population of India as per the 2011 Census, have historically been among the most marginalized communities in the country. While their share in the overall population remains relatively small, they have borne a disproportionate burden of displacement due to various developmental projects. A striking 55.16 per cent of the total displaced people in India belong to Scheduled Tribes, a statistic that underlines the systemic

victimization of these Indigenous communities. The phenomenon of development-induced involuntary displacement of tribal populations is most prevalent in states with high tribal concentrations, including Bihar, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra, where large-scale infrastructure projects, mining activities, and industrial expansion have led to the forced uprooting of tribal communities from their ancestral lands. Odisha, with its significant tribal presence, has the second-largest tribal population in India after the undivided Madhya Pradesh. The state is home to 62 different tribal groups, comprising about 23 per cent of its total population. Despite the constitutional safeguards and numerous welfare initiatives, these tribal communities continue to remain socially, economically, and educationally backward. Their isolation in remote geographical pockets, coupled with a subsistence economy largely dependent on natural resources, has rendered them vulnerable to systemic exploitation by dominant non-tribal groups. Moneylenders, contractors, and corrupt officials, often backed by political and law enforcement entities, have exerted significant control over tribal affairs, further marginalizing these communities. The lack of education and awareness among tribals has made them susceptible to deceit, coercion, and exploitation, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement (Tripathy, 2014).

### Displacement and Marginalization of Tribes in Odisha

The Koya tribe, an ancient and historically significant community with a rich cultural heritage, exemplifies the plight of Odisha's tribal groups. With a deep spiritual connection to nature and a reverence for water bodies such as the Indravati, Godavari, Sabari, and Sileru rivers, the Koyas once thrived in the densely forested Eastern Ghats. These regions, spanning Bastar, Koraput, Warangal, Khammam, Karimnagar, and the East and West Godavari districts, provided the Koya people with sustenance and security. However, the pressures of modernization, land acquisition, and resource exploitation have dramatically altered their way of life. In Malkangiri district, one of the most tribal-dominated regions of Odisha, the Koya, along with the Bonda and Gadaba tribes, have faced continuous displacement and dispossession due to various state-led initiatives and migration patterns induced by external factors. The tribal settlements in Materu and Niliguda Gram Panchayats, located in Podia block of Malkangiri, are among the most affected by displacement and economic distress. These remote villages, accessible only through rugged terrain from the district headquarters in Malkangiri via Sikhpalli and from the block headquarters at Podia, have witnessed significant demographic and socioeconomic transformations due to forced displacement. The historical context of

displacement in this region is intricately linked with migration patterns that date back to the mid-20th century, particularly the influx of refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) into India between 1947 and 1971.

The partition of India in 1947 and subsequent communal tensions led to large-scale migration from East Pakistan to India, a process that continued for decades. Religious and political strife, including the 1964 East Pakistan riots and the 1965 India-Pakistan War, triggered mass exodus, with an estimated 600,000 refugees fleeing to India during periods of heightened violence. However, the most significant wave of migration occurred during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, when systematic atrocities, including mass killings, rapes, and arson, forced nearly 10 million East Bengali refugees, predominantly Hindus, to seek shelter in India. The immediate impact of this crisis was felt in the bordering states of West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura, where the initial refugee settlements emerged. However, as these states struggled to accommodate the ever-growing displaced population, the Indian Government initiated a resettlement strategy, dispersing refugees to other states, including Madhya Pradesh (now Chhattisgarh), Odisha, and Andhra Pradesh (Tripathy, 2019). To manage this large-scale resettlement, the Indian Government conceptualized the Dandakaranya Project in 1947. The Project's primary goal was to rehabilitate the homeless refugees from East Pakistan by providing them with land, housing, employment, and other basic amenities. Recognizing the complexities of such an endeavour, the Government formed the AMPO Committee, comprising representatives from Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha, to assess the feasibility of resettling refugees in the tribal-dominated Dandakaranya region. In 1958, the Dandakaranya Development Authority (DDA) was established, and its headquarters were in Koraput, overseeing the implementation of the Project. However, the resettlement of refugees under the Dandakaranya Project came at a severe cost to the indigenous tribal communities, who were not consulted during the planning and execution phases. The Government presumed that the tribals could be easily displaced to make way for the refugees, leading to widespread land alienation and economic disruption (Tripathy,2019, 2024c). The tribal population, which had been cultivating land for generations without formal land records, found themselves dispossessed as the state prioritized the resettlement of refugees. Large tracts of forest land, which had historically provided shelter and sustenance to the tribals, were cleared for refugee rehabilitation, severely impacting their traditional livelihoods. With no legal recognition of their land rights, many tribal families were forcibly evicted and driven further into the interior forests and hilly terrains, exacerbating their socioeconomic

vulnerability. The displacement of the Koya tribe was further intensified by large dam projects such as Duduma, Balimela, and Upper Kolab, which submerged vast stretches of tribal land. Additionally, the influx of refugees and settlers from diverse cultural backgrounds altered the demographic fabric of the region, leading to socio-cultural disintegration among the Koyas (Tripathy, 2019). While the refugees were granted agricultural, typically 10 acres per family, in the plains of Malkangiri-along with housing, employment, education, and healthcare facilities, the indigenous Koya population received little to no support, deepening their economic and social marginalization.

Despite the Government's intent to integrate the refugees into the regional economy, the rehabilitation package had unforeseen consequences, disrupting traditional tribal livelihoods and eroding Indigenous social structures. The Bengali resettlers, equipped with advanced agricultural knowledge and access to government resources, introduced new farming techniques, high-yield crop varieties, and irrigation infrastructure. While some Koya families initially engaged in sharecropping arrangements with the resettlers, these relationships soon became exploitative. The introduction of moneylending practices by the resettlers led to the mortgaging of tribal lands at unreasonably low prices, further disenfranchising the Koya community. Moreover, the socioeconomic interactions between the Koyas and the Bengali resettlers created new cultural dynamics. The resettlers introduced market-oriented activities such as cockfighting, a popular entertainment form among the Koya. However, these interactions often reinforced economic dependencies, as the resettlers established small businesses that capitalized on the needs of the tribal population. Over time, the traditional barter economy of the Koyas gave way to cash-based transactions, increasing their reliance on external market forces. The ecological impact of displacement and deforestation also proved detrimental to the Koya way of life. As large tracts of forest were cleared for refugee settlements and commercial agriculture, the availability of forest produce was a crucial component of the Koya diet and economy. Moreover, the loss of pasturelands affected cattle rearing, a significant livelihood source for the tribe. The resultant socioeconomic upheaval forced many Koyas to migrate further into the interiors, adopting precarious survival strategies in unfamiliar terrains.

## Development Challenges and Cultural Transformation in Malkangiri

Malkangiri District, located at the southernmost tip of Odisha, is a region that has long been synonymous with government apathy and neglect despite being carved out of the undivided Koraput district in October 1992. The district is mainly comprised of Bonda,

Koya, Poraja, and Didayi tribes, apart from Bengali settlers, and is widely considered to be the most underdeveloped in Odisha. Its residents blame the coastal leaders for their misfortunes, stating that the coastal districts have traditionally dominated Odisha politics, a claim that the state government denies. Some argue that Naxalites, who demand tribal development, have contributed to Malkangiri's underdevelopment, adding to the challenges that need to be resolved. Roads are widely regarded as vehicles for development, but they also provide access to security forces. Therefore, the rebels have hesitated to allow very few roads to be built or repaired across the 1,045-village district. The Maoists even obstruct the construction of culverts and bridges. A prime example of this obstruction is the 100-km-long Malkangiri-Jeypore road, which is the only link between Malkangiri and the rest of the state and desperately needs repair. The road is a never-ending stretch of craters, some deep enough to swallow a small car. Officials acknowledge that connectivity is the primary problem plaguing the district, once part of the Dandakaranya project established in September 1958 to rehabilitate displaced Bengalis from what was then East Pakistan and is now Bangladesh. Several distinctive factors contribute to the underdevelopment of Malkangiri, and these must be resolved to ensure the region progresses towards development and prosperity. Bell's Gazetteer, a reference source from 1945 that is often cited, referred to the Koyas as one of the "aboriginal tribes" whose population was recorded as 27,891 in the 1941 Census. However, by the time of the 1981 Census, the state's population of Koya had increased to 87,261. In the 1991 Census, the Koya population in Malkangiri alone was estimated to be 1,40,000. According to the 2011 Census, the total population of Malkangiri was 613,192, with males numbering 303,624 and females numbering 309,568. By comparison, in the 2001 Census, Malkangiri had a population of 504,198, with males numbering 252,507 and females numbering 251,691. Due to its small population, Malkangiri has a much lower population density of only 106 people per square kilometre, the lowest of any district in the state. This, coupled with the region's rugged terrain, severely limits the effectiveness of development interventions.

Furthermore, the district has experienced a large influx of refugees since the 1960s, primarily Bengalis from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), but also some Tamils from Sri Lanka. This influx has led to a dramatic transformation of Malkangiri and has created problems unique to the region that are not found elsewhere in Odisha or India. Malkangiri is divided into seven blocks, which are broadly clustered into three areas: Kudmulugumma, Malkangiri, and Korukonda regions form one cluster; Maithili and Khairput form the second; and Podie and Kalimela form the third. The

total geographical area of Malkangiri district is approximately 6190 square kilometres, with nearly one-third of the land covered by deciduous forest. Of the seven blocks, Khoirput, Kalimela, and Kudumuluguma have more than one-third of their area covered by forest. Due to undulating terrain, hills, ghat ranges, rivers, and streams, the net sown area in Malkangiri constitutes only around one-fourth of the total surface area. While in the plains, the net sown area accounts for more than one-third of the total area, it is significantly less in ghat areas, and in the Kudumuluguma block, it is even less than one-tenth. Malkangiri, with its 13 tribal communities, constitutes 58.36 per cent (2 46,214) of the total population. At the same time, the total population also includes 84,208 Scheduled Caste (SC) individuals (19.96%), most of whom are refugees who have been resettled in the district under the Dandakaranya resettlement project, which was initiated in the early 1960s. Malkangiri is the most isolated district in the state, both geographically and infrastructurally, as there are no railway lines present (although the construction of a railway was part of the Dandakaranya Development Project). The extent of electrification is well below that of the other undivided Koraput-Bolangir-Kalahandi (KBK) districts, with only 35.35 per cent of villages electrified, as noted in Tripathy's work in 2016. The district comprises 934 revenue villages, including 132 M.V. (Malkangiri Village) and 81 M.P.V. (Malkangiri Potteru Village), specially created to rehabilitate the refugees. Moreover, the district has seven blocks and seventy-seven Gram Panchayats. A careful study of the social and behavioural traits of the two principal communities of Malkangiri, namely the Koyas and the Bengali refugee settlers, at the village level and in the local power structure reveals a fascinating picture concerning their modes of living, development, and inter-ethnic conflict.

## Objectives

- To analyze the impact of development-induced displacement, refugee resettlement, and socioeconomic transformations on Odisha's tribal communities, particularly the Koya, highlighting land alienation, cultural disruption, and economic marginalization.

- This study explores Koya tribal socioeconomic disparities, focusing on land and property distribution, living standards, and debt patterns. It highlights loan sources, terms, and cultural-economic drivers behind their financial vulnerabilities and resilience.

- This study aims to examine the persistent underdevelopment of Malkangiri District by analyzing the interplay of government neglect, Naxalite influence, and poor

infrastructure, particularly the lack of roads and electrification. It will explore how these factors hinder progress across 1,045 villages and diverse tribal and refugee populations.

- The research seeks to investigate the socioeconomic and cultural dynamics of the Koya tribe in Malkangiri, focusing on their traditional practices, population growth, and resistance to external domination, alongside their interactions with Bengali settlers, to understand the unique challenges shaping their development and inter-ethnic relations.

## Methodology

The study primarily relies on secondary data sources to analyze the socioeconomic and infrastructural challenges in Malkangiri District. Data is gathered from government reports, census records, scholarly articles, and historical documents like Bell's Gazetteer. Policy papers, NGO reports, and media sources also provide insights into tribal demographics, land use patterns, migration trends, and conflict dynamics. Comparative analysis of past and present census data helps assess demographic shifts. Archival sources on tribal uprisings and government interventions supplement the study, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of Malkangiri's development trajectory.

## The Koya Tribe: Cultural Heritage, Resistance and Resilience

The Koyas sustain themselves with a diverse diet primarily composed of rice, ragi, pulses, vegetables, roots, and tubers as their foundational staples, demonstrating a lack of dietary discrimination that has earned them a reputation for consuming virtually anything available, ranging from rats to cows. Their vibrant cultural life is expressed through celebrations and festivals like the Dhernsa dance, Mahul Parab, Nuakhai, and Chaita Parab, which are imbued with a distinctive ethnic flavour, and these events remain incomplete without the inclusion of liquor and offerings to their deities, reflecting a deep intertwining of tradition and spirituality. The religious practices of the Koyas blend their ancestral tribal beliefs with elements of Hinduism, creating a unique syncretic faith that shapes their worldview. In a typical Koya village, consisting of 30 to 35 houses scattered across a jungle clearing without proper communication infrastructure, simplicity defines their existence, a trait that unfortunately renders them susceptible to exploitation by shrewd traders and moneylenders from the plains who take advantage of their naivety in every conceivable manner. Their awareness rarely

extends beyond the confines of their immediate village happenings, contributing to literacy rates that languish below 10%. At the same time, governance within these communities is overseen by a traditional council comprising the village headman (Pedda), whose role is hereditary, the priest (Pujari), the sorcerer (Wadde), and the messenger (Chalan), all of whom uphold the social and spiritual order.

The Koyas communicate primarily in Koyi, a dialect believed to derive from Gondi, which serves as their native tongue and ties them linguistically to broader tribal traditions. Geographically, the Koyas of Malkangiri connect to the Agency tracts of East Godavari, where they constitute the dominant tribe, as well as the adjacent regions of Bastar, and they are regarded as an offshoot or extension of the principal Koya population rooted in Andhra Pradesh. Based on their residential patterns, the Koyas are categorized into three distinct groups: the Gamminar Koya, inhabiting the Motu and Andhra border areas; the Gaiter Koya, residing along the Podia block and Madhya Pradesh border; and the Mentatar Koya, settled in the district's core, with the Northern Koyas clinging more steadfastly to traditional ways compared to their Southern counterparts, who have adopted influences from Andhra Pradesh in language, attire, and social customs. Historically, the Koya tribe has distinguished itself through courageous opposition to colonial forces, most notably during the late 19th century when, under the leadership of the iconic Tamma Dora, they mounted a rebellion against the British administration from 1879 to 1880. This uprising marked a seminal chapter in their history and solidified their legacy as fierce resistors of external domination. Another significant chapter unfolded in the early 20th century when Alluri Sitarama Raju galvanized a tribal revolt in the Chitrakonda region of Malkangiri between 1922 and 1924, rallying the Koyas and neighbouring tribes against British rule. This movement climaxed with Raju's martyrdom and was subsequently enshrined in the folkloric fabric of Malkangiri. The Koyas further contributed to India's broader fight for independence from British colonialism, with figures like the martyr Lakshman Naik joining the Quit India Movement, enduring imprisonment for their defiance, and exemplifying the tribe's resolute commitment to the cause of liberation through their bravery and sacrifice. Despite the myriad challenges and adversities encountered across their history, the Koya people persist in safeguarding their cultural traditions and way of life, embodying a rich heritage, an unyielding sense of community, and a spirit of resistance that collectively positions them as a powerful emblem of the enduring strength and resilience of Indigenous peoples worldwide.

## Study of Land, Property and Financial Obligations among the Koya Tribe

During an extensive inquiry into the family holdings of land and other property among the Koyas, it became evident that the standard of living varies significantly from one family to another within each village, with some families enjoying relative wealth. In contrast, others languish in poverty, the latter often lacking sufficient land for cultivation and cows and bullocks, which serve as essential productive capital, forcing those living at or below subsistence levels to incur debts to sustain themselves. The Koyas, characteristically reticent and suspicious of outsiders, are reluctant to disclose details about the loans they have taken, making it a challenging task to gather accurate data on the nature and extent of their indebtedness, though through persistent effort and with assistance from a village-level worker, the author managed to collect information from villages such as Sikapalli, Kursuwada, Ponaru, Marlwada, Khirntagada, Cheriguda, and Markheligada, revealing the intricate web of financial obligations that bind this community. Predominantly, the Koyas borrow from within their ranks rather than from the Doms-self-identified Valmikis who sporadically cohabit in the same villages but reside in separate hamlets-whose primary occupation involves lending to the Koyas in times of need and exacting repayment with steep interest, such as returning ten mans of paddy with an additional five mans after a year; for instance, Madkam Dewa from Sikapalli recounted how his father borrowed one puti of paddy (approximately one maund) from a Dom named Dwari Kanaya in Kursuwada. Following his father's death a decade ago, he has repaid one cow, one calf, and twenty-eight rupees. He still owes three gadisas of paddy (equivalent to ninety maunds), illustrating the burdensome legacy of such loans. Credit transactions also occur between blood and affinal kin, though these are typically interest-free, whereas loans from unrelated parties demand interest at half the borrowed amount per annum, highlighting a dual system of financial support shaped by kinship ties; the primary reasons for incurring debt, as gleaned from numerous cases, include sustaining livelihoods (Tripathy, 2012).

During scarcity-when Koyas approach wealthier villagers for cash or kind, repayable post-harvest-along with meeting substantial expenditures for marriage ceremonies, where a groom must provide a pair of cattle (one male and one female calf) to the bride's father and fund a lavish feast for her accompanying kin, and funerary rites, where hosting relatives and villagers for feasts and menhir erection necessitates significant resources, often driving the less affluent to borrow when their means fall short of these social and economic obligations. The practice of employing a 'Goti'-a bond enslaved person is widespread among the Koyas, particularly among wealthier

households seeking manual labour assistance, as observed in villages like Sikapalli, where several such servants are engaged, driven by factors such as escaping poverty or securing a bride, since a man at subsistence level cannot afford the customary bride price and lacks the resources to repay loans, prompting him to serve a rich employer outside his village, a pattern the author found consistent with no instances of Gotis working within their home communities. The employer-employee relationship mirrors familial bonds, with Gotis treated as working, eating, and sharing household access alongside their adopting kinship terms like 'uncle' or 'brother' if from the same clan, or affinal terms like 'mama' if from another, fostering a sense of integration despite their servitude. This system underlines both economic necessity and social adaptability within Koya society.

## Habits of Food and Drink

The Koyas' diet is remarkably diverse, reflecting their reliance on both cultivated and wild resources, with paddy being a staple that is husked, boiled into rice, and predominantly consumed as 'Jawa' or gruel rather than solid rice, a practice that stretches limited supplies. At the same time, pulses like Biri, Peshli, and Mung are mixed with rice for gruel, and Suan, maize, and Mandia (Gora) are similarly boiled into gruel, providing foundational sustenance. Vegetables such as pumpkin, gourd, karela, and eggfruit are prepared as curries to accompany Jawa or 'Chakur' (parched rice), the latter a delicacy savoured during and post-harvest when paddy is plentiful, typically eaten once in the evening with gruel reserved for daytime. At the same time 'Idu' or 'Ikk' (Mahul) is fried with oil from its dried seeds, serving as a substantial food source during scarcity alongside 'Sudul Wanzi' (small paddy), and Tumid (Kendu fruit) is collected in bulk, dried, and stored for lean times; women gather an array of wild greens ('Kusir') from fields, jungles, and water edges to make curries, and roots from the jungle-boiled and eaten fresh-sustain them for extended periods when paddy stocks dwindle, supplemented by young bamboo shoots. Animal protein is equally varied: fish ('Kike') is curried, dried, and stored, while crabs, snails, and tortoises are roasted during rainy and other seasons, and 'Alang'-red ant nests brimming with eggs-are ground into a paste for curry; all wild animals and birds except tigers and bears are consumed without hesitation, with domesticated pigs, goats, and fowls providing meat in abundance, and small game like squirrels, wild rats, and hares hunted relentlessly, often roasted and shared after hours-long pursuits by groups of hunters, reflecting a robust carnivorous streak. Liquor is not a luxury but a necessity for the Koyas, who claim they cannot

survive without it; it is deeply embedded in ritual and social life, with no marriage or religious ceremony complete without its presence; 'Landa' or rice beer, fermented from rice, is the most ubiquitous, consumed by men, women, and children alike and central to marriage feasts. At the same time, 'Idu Katu,' distilled from Mahul flowers, is less common due to cost, though 'Suram' or 'Uram,' another Mahul-based brew, is widely used given the tree's abundance. Sago-palm and toddy-palm juices are drunk where available, the latter sustaining southern Malkangiri Koyas for days without food, a dietary spectrum that, if studied in detail by experts, could reveal links to prevalent diseases, especially since some roots, if improperly prepared, cause joint swelling and pain, underscoring potential health implications of their foraging habits.

## Family Structure and Dynamics

The family, termed 'Lotam' in the Koya language, stands as the cornerstone of their social structure, resembling the Hindu joint family system by encompassing parents, their adult sons with wives and children, unmarried sons and daughters, and occasionally the 'Olaam' or ghar jwain-a son-in-law living with his wife in her father's home through marriage-by-service-though as sons marry and mature, they often build separate homes around the parental house, cooking still centralized until an adult son seeks complete independence by requesting land from his father, a trend exemplified by Madakam Masa, the Sikapalli headman, who lives with two sons. In contrast, two others have established separate households, signaling a gradual erosion of the joint family system warranting further study. Monogamy prevails, but polygyny exists among wealthier Koyas able to afford multiple wives-three or four in some cases-such as the Sikapalli headman with three wives (one deceased) and his son Madkam Bojja (36) with two, or Madkam Dewa (38) with two (one deceased), driven by economic benefits from wives' labour contributions and sexual needs when older wives age beyond their husbands' vigor, enhancing a man's status; in polygynous homes, a man shares a room with all wives without jealousy, while unmarried girls over ten sleep with grandparents or lone older women, and boys over ten sleep in groups elsewhere. Economically, the family operates as a cooperative unit, with labour divided by sex-men and women sharing distinct roles as previously detailed-preserving cultural traditions across generations, led by the father, who wields authority, owns most property (except some female-held items), and directs work, succeeded by his eldest son in a patrilineal lineage; wives, though subordinate, coexist with mutual adjustment, occasional quarrels notwithstanding, training daughters while fathers train sons, and as the father ages, the

eldest son assumes leadership, rarely facing filial disrespect. However, reports of sons beating elderly fathers exist but are exceptional, with most treated with affection and devotion, reflecting a robust yet evolving familial framework.

## Units of Kin Group

The Koyas delineate two primary kin categories-'Kuturnam' (consanguine kin) and 'Wiwalwand' (affinal kin)-organized into five named exogamous phratries ('Katta') in both northern and southern regions: Kowasi, Sodi, Madkam, Madi, and Padiam (with southern equivalents like Edukatta, Aidukatta, Mulkatta, Parengatta, and Perumboi), each comprising multiple clans ('Bansa') prohibiting marriage within the same phratry due to presumed blood ties, a rule enforced by inquiring about a prospective spouse's phratry, as seen in clan lists from Mallavaram and Mottu (e.g., Kawasi with clans like Duber and Wanzamir, or Madkam with Kalmu and Pondur) and northern variations (e.g., Madkam with Nupod and Gaita), unified by totems like tortoise for Madkam, goat for Madi, and buffalo for Sodi, Padiam, and Kowasi, which members abstain from eating. Clan names vary locally, and not all are universally recognized, supported by the myth 'Dada Burkakawa,' where a flood spared a brother (Kawas) and sister who, floating in a gourd, landed on an island, cultivated with a 'Kasal,' and, lacking others, married, birthing seven sons and two daughters whose unions with elder brothers founded the phratries, a narrative varying by locale but consistently tracing descent from this primal pair; practically, the broad phratry system scatters kin widely, prompting distinctions between 'Jegtadi' (distant) and 'Boketadi' (nearer) relations, with consanguine kin spanning paternal lines from grandfather to grandchildren, including brothers' families but excluding father's sisters, tasked with bringing rice beer to weddings and cloth to funerals, while affinal kin, tied by marriage, include maternal relatives and father's sisters-whose daughters are marriageable-deemed more vital due to frequent interaction, as villages host mixed phratries to ensure exogamous bride availability, a structure balancing tradition with pragmatic social cohesion across their dispersed society.

## The Koya System of Marriage

Koya marriage, known as 'Pendul,' stands as a pivotal social institution, indispensable for a man's societal standing, driven by the imperatives of perpetuating lineage, satisfying sexual needs, and securing a wife as an essential partner across all facets of life, a necessity underscored by the division of labour based on sex which reveals that a Koya's

daily existence hinges on a wife's contributions, with little emphasis placed on a girl's physical beauty as a marriage criterion, favouring instead her health and capacity for strenuous economic and social labor. At the same time, a desirable husband is judged by his ability to support a family, possession of numerous cows and bullocks, and physical stature and vigour. Freedom in choosing a spouse is severely restricted, with parents predominantly orchestrating marriage negotiations. However, limited autonomy exists in alternative forms bearing distinct names and complex compensation processes as the commonly practised 'Pendul', the 'Karsu Pendul' where a boy abducts a girl from forest or field with friends' aid, requiring hefty compensation to her father, or the 'Lon-udi-Iwata' where a girl with prior ties to a boy moves into his home voluntarily, reducing the bride-price due to her self-initiated choice-each reflecting varying degrees of agency and tradition; in 'Karsu Pendul', for instance, a boy must secure the girl's consent, inform his father, and, upon approval, fetch her with friends, facing a demand of three hundred rupees, a she-calf for her maternal uncle, and cloth for her mother, of which eighty rupees are redistributed by the bride's father to his villagers for their role in securing compensation, culminating in a communal feast. Marriageable age aligns with physical maturity-boys deemed ready at twelve or thirteen when armpit hair and moustaches emerge. Girls at puberty ('tartan), regardless of exact age-often resulting in wives older than husbands, a factor contributing to polygamy as women's sexual vigour wanes before their youthful spouses'. However, complications arise when a nubile girl weds an immature boy misjudged as mature due to early hair growth, forcing her to wait for his full sexual maturity while expected to remain chaste, a fidelity rarely maintained, with rare cases of adolescent boys marrying infant brides necessitating further delays until her maturity. Betrothal spans one to two years, initiated by the groom's parents who, accompanied by relatives and villagers bearing Mahul liquor, approach the bride's father, whose acceptance is signalled by drinking or rejection by refusal, setting a post-harvest wedding date, while sexual relations within the same clan-real or classificatory-are taboo ('Barhia Tapu'), punishable by clan-internal fines, with preferential marriages favouring a mother's brother's or father's sister's daughter, compensated if unavailable, alongside practices like sororal polygamy (marrying a wife's younger sisters sequentially), widow remarriage to an elder brother's widow ('Yange'), but not a younger brother's due to her daughter-in-law status ('Kadiar'), and sister-exchange marriages ('Marsanad Pendul'); adultery leads to divorce with compensation-goat, cloth, ten mans of rice, and twelve rupees—decided by the Panchayat, allowing the wife to join her lover or return to her father depending on the cause.

## Marriage Ceremony

The Koya marriage ceremony unfolds over three days, commencing with the ceremonial water-fetching by the groom's elder brother's wife ('Yange'), accompanied by women singing as they collect 'Putu eru' (birth water) from a nearby source, a ritual repeated on the second day when she bathes the groom-seated on her lap-with tamarind, turmeric paste, and ghee, followed by a village tour where clan women bathe him amid drumbeats and, for wealthier families, muzzle-loading gunshots, while men dispatched by the groom's father invite and overnight at the bride's village; on the third day, the bride arrives, escorted by singing women, greeted mid-journey with rice beer from the groom's father, resting before proceeding to the 'endbayul' dancing ground where hundreds, adorned in bison-horn headdresses ('perma Kok') and waist garments, dance to drumming, joined spontaneously by uninvited villagers from afar who receive rice beer, Mahul liquor, rice, and pork, cooking and eating before dispersing-a generosity tied to prestige that compels hosts to borrow if unprepared, as denying participation risks humiliation. The bride's party enters slowly, halting every few yards with singing and the bride weeping on a companion's shoulder until reaching the groom's house, where a struggle ensues, resolved when the groom's mother washes the bride's feet and marks her forehead with turmeric, followed by communal rice beer drinking from leaf cups; the couple is then bathed indoors, don new clothes, and proceeds to a streamside ritual spot where, seated on their respective 'Yange's' laps, they eat, the groom consuming a cock's leg before returning to drink rice beer, leaving the bride to join later that evening, sleeping with her kin in a designated space with 'Chakna landa' rice beer; the next morning, the village priest administers 'Ana landa' (sacred rice beer) to the couple-bride first, then groom-initiating group drinking, with the bride abstaining from the groom's household food until evening when the 'Yange' leads her to the 'Aan lon' room for their first night together, followed a week later by a visit to her parents with rice beer, a cock, and Mahul liquor. Throughout, women sing purpose-specific songs-like obscene verses deprecating the groom during hand-joining or 'Armirranad pat' when a girl is captured-echoing historical abductions, offering a rich tapestry of customs ripe for systematic study, blending formality with vestiges of ancient practices.

## Child Training and Education

The Koyas lack comprehension of the physiological link between sexual intercourse and conception, attributing pregnancy to divine intervention where a god places the child in the mother's womb, allowing a pregnant woman to continue routine work

until her delivery month, when she retreats to a hut behind the main house, returning home six to seven days post-birth, a pragmatic adaptation to their labour-intensive lives; the naming ceremony follows days later, uniquely limited in variety as multiple villagers share names due to a ritual where a shaman, cradling the infant with rice in its closed palms, recites names until the rice falls—assigning the name uttered then-or, alternatively, induces crying until the child sleeps, naming it at that moment, reflecting a belief in reincarnation where a grandfather's name recurs in grandsons, embedding ancestral continuity in identity. Early child-rearing hinges on the mother, who nurtures the child until weaning around age seven-teaching speech and object names, treating the child kindly until post-weaning, when mild coercion curbs unruly impulses, with gender-specific discipline emerging later as fathers avoid beating daughters over twelve and mothers spare sons of the same age, expecting proper behaviour pre-maturity; until six, children go unclothed, but thereafter mothers teach both sexes to wear 'Chil wudsa' (loin cloths covering genitals), with girls by ten mastering 'Gofa wudsa' (traditional female attire) and boys adopting male styles, signaling a gradual socialization into gendered norms. Boys acquire traditional skills early, crafting miniature bows and arrows ('Juri') before adolescence, playing 'Jurikarsitor'-a targeting game where groups or pairs compete, losers forfeiting arrows to winners-honing precision evident in ten-year-olds who hunt small birds, roasting and sharing their catch, a practice blending play with survival skills; this informal education, devoid of formal schooling, embeds practical knowledge and social expectations, shaping children into capable contributors within their community's rugged, resource-dependent framework, where physical adeptness and cultural continuity trump abstract learning, reflecting an adaptive resilience suited to their environment.

## Leadership & Religion in Koya Society

The Koya social structure intricately weaves leadership and religion into the fabric of daily life, with the headman, priest, magician, and other figures wielding distinct yet interconnected authority over political, social, and spiritual domains, ensuring the community's cohesion and adherence to tradition amidst external influences and internal challenges; this exploration delves into the roles of the Peda (headman), Perma (priest), Wadde (magician), and Katwal (messenger), alongside the mechanisms for dispute settlement and the rich tapestry of religious beliefs and ceremonies that define Koya identity. Leadership in Koya villages, encompassing both political and social spheres, pivots around the headman, or Peda, whose authority, until recent times, extended to

significant economic privileges that rendered him a near-omnipotent figure within the community, a stature further amplified by his proactive role in religious affairs where he initiates ceremonies by rallying the priest and villagers for various observances; traditionally, the position is hereditary, passing to the eldest son upon the headman's death, contingent upon fulfilling specific prerequisites such as being impartial, adept at representing villagers' grievances to visiting government officials, wise in adjudicating disputes, and, increasingly, conversant in rudimentary Oriya to liaise with officials and traders, attributes that underscore the evolving demands on leadership in a modernizing context. Wealth, while not the sole determinant, significantly bolsters a candidate's eligibility, with headmen typically among the village's more affluent, though not necessarily the richest, and while succession favours the eldest son, deviations occur if he lacks requisite qualities, shifting preference to a capable younger son or, in the absence of sons, to a brother's son, and failing that, to the village priest, who then doubles as a religious and secular leader; the headman adjudicates village disputes by convening elders and the conflicting parties, who present their cases before him, and extends his influence beyond his village by participating in the Kula Panchayat-clan-specific councils addressing issues like incest-despite not belonging to the clan, leveraging his village-wide authority to mediate. His decisions command unchallenged respect, with no recorded instances of an unjust or unpopular headman. However, a mechanism exists wherein villagers annually convene during the 'Peda Gudam' to review his performance, offering critiques he must heed to rectify, and in extreme cases of unpopularity, they may select a replacement; in Mallavaram, a new headman's installation involves a ceremonial turban-wrapping by the priest and an oath before the village goddess to uphold justice, symbolizing the sacred trust vested in him. Beyond the village, the Mutha Panchayat-a regional council of five headmen from different villages-handles grave inter-village disputes like murder ('Barhiya tapu'), witchcraft, or sorcery, convened at the aggrieved party's request through their headman, illustrating a tiered governance structure that balances local autonomy with broader regional oversight, ensuring disputes are resolved with communal consensus and compensation where necessary.

Next in prominence, the Perma or priest wields substantial influence as a religious leader, revered for his perceived ability to commune with supernatural entities, serving as a vital intermediary between the Koyas and the unseen forces they believe govern their lives, a role rooted in their dependence on rituals to mitigate natural calamities-attributed to angered deities requiring appeasement-and to secure blessings for

bountiful harvests or successful hunts, reflecting a worldview where every facet of existence intertwines with the divine; the priesthood is typically hereditary, passing to a son or, in the absence of direct heirs, a brother's son, with aspirants undergoing rigorous initiation rituals including sexual abstinence and training from another priest if their father is deceased, ensuring the transmission of sacred knowledge. During festivals like Bijja Pandu, Larkapandu, and Idupandu, the priest meticulously observes taboos-fasting, avoiding food cooked by women, and maintaining continence the night prior rather than after offerings to the gods, a privilege extended to tasting new fruits or liquor before villagers, who believe this placates deities; beyond rituals, he participates in village Panchayat meetings, offering counsel as an elder on disputes, and during smallpox outbreaks-attributed to a goddess-he enforces community taboos, reinforcing his dual role as a spiritual guide and social arbiter. This position commands respect and underscores the Koyas' reliance on him to navigate the supernatural realm that shapes their fortunes.

## Wadde or Magician

Equally pivotal, the Wadde or magician occupies a unique niche, distinguished not by heredity or election but by a supernatural calling signalled at birth by 'Jatel' (matted hair), marking him as destined for this role, nurtured from childhood under parental care with dietary taboos and later trained by an adult magician to master his craft; unlike the priest, who propitiates deities, the Wadde manipulates supernatural forces, wielding power to both harness malevolent spirits against enemies-instilling dread among the Koyas-and expel them to heal afflictions. This duality positions him as both feared and indispensable, mainly since most diseases are attributed to spirits or wrathful gods, prompting immediate recourse to his chants and formulas. In daily life, he integrates seamlessly, enjoying equal rights and adhering to social norms, yet his ambivalent reception-simultaneously admired and dreaded-reflects the Koyas' complex reliance on his abilities to counter the malevolent forces they perceive as ever-present threats, making his presence a critical bulwark against misfortune in a society where the supernatural looms large. The Katwal, though less authoritative, serves as a crucial adjunct to the headman, facilitating village coordination by summoning residents for meetings or communal tasks during religious festivals, acting as a messenger to other villages for inter-village gatherings, and arranging hospitality for outsiders under the headman's direction, roles that enhance his utility without elevating him to the stature of the headman, priest, or magician; as a villager, he enjoys equal privileges, his

contributions valued for their practicality in supporting leadership functions, ensuring the smooth execution of communal and inter-village activities that sustain Koya social order.

## Settlement of Disputes

Dispute resolution within Koya society operates through a tiered system, with the village Panchayat-comprising the headman, elders, priest, and sometimes the Wadde-addressing intra-village conflicts, while clan-specific issues like incest fall to the Kula Panchayat, limited to clan members plus the headman, and serious inter-village matters escalate to the Mutha Panchayat, a council of regional headmen selected by their peers, a structure mirrored in both northern and southern Malkangiri regions; the Mutha Panchayat tackles breaches of marriage norms, such as elopement, where the aggrieved husband, via his headman, convenes the council, which dispatches Katwals to summon the culprit, demanding the wife's return or a three-hundred-rupee fine-two hundred to the husband, the rest split among members-plus additional items like a cock, pig, rice, and salt, concluding with a feast funded by both parties with five mans of rice and a goat, consumed communally near a water source. Village Panchayats handle adultery, rape, witchcraft, and divorce, escalating to multi-village councils if necessary.

## Religious Beliefs and Ceremonies

The Koya pantheon, enriched over time with Hindu deities, retains its core in the cults of Bhumata (earth goddess) and Gudimata (village goddess), worshipped universally in ceremonies, residing respectively under a Mahul tree and in a thatched Bujjagud shrine, alongside Bimud, the sky-dwelling Rain God honoured annually during Bimud Pandu; key rituals-Bijja Pandu (Baisakh-Jyestha) for earth goddess with cock, pig, egg, and mango offerings to ensure harvests, Kodta Pandu (Bhadrab-Aswin) with suan, Sikud Pandu (Kartik-Margasir) for beans, and Bimud Pandu (Magh-Phalgun) post-harvest with clay Rain God models under a Mahul tree, crops blessed, and water poured over an unmarried girl amid laughter-tie spirituality to agricultural cycles, reinforced by taboos on work and ceremonial hunting like Bijja Weta. Beyond these, gods like Manyemkond, rooted in a myth of four brothers (Kanamraju, Potraju, Bairaju, Pedraju) and two sisters (Mariwada Mawoli, Amatali) from Warangal, Andhra Pradesh, populate the Koya landscape, with variations-Mariwada Mawoli and Pedraju exiled for unsocial acts (human sacrifice and a Dom wife)-reflecting Telugu influence, worshipped fervently by Koyas and regional Hindus alike, their devotion a testament to a syncretic faith that

bridges tribal origins with broader cultural currents, sustaining communal identity through ritual and narrative.

## Concluding Observations

To sum up, the resettlement policies pursued under the Dandakaranya Project, and other development initiatives have had lasting consequences for the indigenous tribal communities of Odisha, particularly the Koya tribe. While the Government aimed to rehabilitate displaced refugees, the failure to acknowledge and protect tribal land rights led to widespread dispossession and socioeconomic distress. The Koya people's experience serves as a stark reminder of the need for inclusive and consultative development policies that respect the rights of Indigenous communities while balancing the broader objectives of economic growth and national integration. The dominant sections have disproportionately cornered the benefits of this development paradigm at the expense of people experiencing poverty, who have borne most of the costs. Development, which is insensitive to the needs of these communities, has invariably caused displacement and reduced them to a subhuman existence. In the case of tribes, it has destroyed their social organization, cultural identity, and resource base and generated multiple conflicts, undermining their communal solidarity and cumulatively making them increasingly vulnerable to exploitation (Tripathy, 2012, 2013, 2024c).

Displacement deprives of the vital sustenance of the tribal people who are dependent on the land, forests, and common property resources (CPR) for their livelihood. Finally, their long-term sustainability is also endangered. Whereas the tribes constitute 8.08% of the country's population, they are 40% of the total displaced/affected persons by the projects (GoI, 2008, p.22, Tripathy, 2014). The elite has, therefore, through such self-styled developmental activities, impoverished the earth of its natural resources. The earth's impoverishment has meant that communities that depend upon the natural base for sustenance have been deprived of their resources. This alienation cannot only be described as a loss of material livelihood; it is most profoundly the loss of cultural autonomy, knowledge, and power (Baviskar, 1995, Tripathy, 2024c). The displaced persons should be resettled in a safe habitat wherein they can start their lives afresh. However, this would require more than merely allocating certain pieces of land for resettlement or constructing makeshift camps for temporary settlement. What is needed is the "rehabilitation" of the persons affected by the projects; rehabilitation means to "restore to the former condition", and thus, all that was lost by displacement, the emotional, cultural, social, political, and economic losses must be restored at a priority

basis than to the Project itself, which is the cause of the impoverishment (Tripathy, 2024c).

It has been observed that the non-recognition of tribes over resources and restrictions on their use, alienation of tribes from the means of production, denial of due entitlement of labour, distressed payment of wages, and misappropriation of development funds have kept the tribes in the web of misery and starvation. In tribal-dominated states in India, the life support system of the local tribes has been snatched away by non-tribes and state institutions through the imposition of restrictions on the use of forests. As a result, the tribal movement originated in the fierce struggle for their rights (Tripathy, 2024a, 2024b). Development, which has entailed many large-scale forced evictions of vulnerable populations without the countervailing presence of policies to assist them in rebuilding their lives, has only accentuated the negative aspects of displacement, such as lack of information, failure to prepare in advance a comprehensive rehabilitation plan, the undervaluation of compensation and its payment in cash, failure to restore lost assets or livelihoods, traumatic and delayed relocation, problems at relocation sites, multiple displacement, and neglect of the unique vulnerabilities of the most disadvantaged groups. Tripathy, 2012, 2013).

In the case of the Koya tribe, particularly the development project resulted in displacement. It destroyed their social organization, cultural identity, and resource base and generated multiple conflicts. It also undermined their communal solidarity, cumulatively making them increasingly vulnerable to exploitation (Tripathy, 2014). From the above discussion, it also transpires that the Government's tribal development policy has not succeeded in bringing about perceptible socioeconomic changes among the Koyas; instead, it has worsened their economic condition. Hence, the development schemes and programs must be people-centred, eco-friendly, and based on their culture to make a significant dent in the development process of the Kayas. Thus, the benefits of development have not percolated to the local Koya tribe, somewhat adversely affected their lifestyle, leading to the violation of human rights, the miserable living standard of tribes, restricted community rights over natural resources and their forest resources, and finally, culminated to an identity crisis of the tribes. The reckless and indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources by the non-tribes who dominate the government machinery in the tribal area results not only a threat to tribal survival but also leads to the depletion of resources in the tribal regions (Sharma, 2010; Tripathy 2024a, 2024b). The socio-economic condition of the tribes in the country is both poor and precarious despite the various enactments and legislations due to ineffective implementation and

lack of political will. The tribes still strive for survival even if they cannot produce sufficient food grain on their farms or get regular daily work. To bring them to par with other communities, special provisions have been made and incorporated in the constitution of India so that the tribes must benefit from the provisions.

Thus, it can be inferred that despite a favourable political, institutional, and financial commitment to tribal development, there is presently a large-scale displacement and biological decline of tribal communities, a growing loss of genetic and cultural diversity and destruction of a rich resource base leading to rising trends of dwindling forests, crumbling fisheries, increasing unemployment, hunger and conflicts. Given this backdrop of our analysis, we can suggest that our legal framework should be restructured with the right to life of the commoner, particularly the poverty-stricken tribes, as the central point. All unconstitutional elements should be identified and eliminated from all laws, particularly those concerning the command over resources, ownership of means of production, and existence of labour.

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