

## **ABSTRACT**

This study examined the various issues about the Lambada community in the state of Telangana. It discussed how the community had evolved from its earlier nomadic status to one which has settled down to create its unique culture, traditions, life cycle rituals, dances, songs, etc. It also discussed the impact of modernization on the community in areas like religious practices, dress, language, rituals, and institutions of self governance.

The study was covered in five chapters, as under:

- Chapter 1. After introducing the subject, there was a discussion about what the term ‘tribe’ implies, the various tribes present in the state of Telangana, the history of the Lambadas, the social life of persons belonging to this community and the clan system of the Lambadas. It will also include a literature review, discussion of the methodology adopted and the works cited in the study.
- Chapter 2. This largely focused on the rituals and celebrations of the Lambadas. Emphasis would be laid on the various festivals, the folk tradition, the clan Goddesses, the Lambada saints, and the various traditional life cycle rituals.
- Chapter 3. This explored the various religious influences – traditional (animism), Hinduism, Christianity and Sikhism - on the Lambadas. The focus will be on how each of these religions has metamorphosed the life cycle rituals, food habits, dress, language, etc., of the Lambadas. An attempt was also made to ascertain whether the ‘converted’ Lambadas have totally jettisoned their traditional religious and cultural practices, or have still managed to retain some elements of these.
- Chapter 4. This chapter was more contemporary in nature since it discussed the challenges posed to the traditional and culture of the Lambadas. Areas covered

included the impact on the folk tradition, the institution of marriage (including the 'entry' of the dowry system in a big way), the tribal economy, the native language and the attire of the Lambadas – more so the females.

- Chapter 5. This contained the main findings of the study and suggestions for future research in this area of study.

It speaks volumes about the resilience of this community that it has fully grown out of the totally unjust tag of a 'criminal tribe' to emerge as a very vibrant and colourful tribe, which has enriched and added luster to the cultural fabric of India. The study explored the various facets about the culture and traditions of the Lambadas. The focus was be on establishing that this community has its well laid down norms and practices, which can by no stretch of imagination be termed as pagan or savage. It also emerged that there are strong community bonds and respect for elders among the Lambadas, which are almost disappearing in the more 'modern' societies. It was also established that the Lambadas participate in their festivals and rituals with full vigour and enthusiasm. Unlike most modern urban societies, where it is very likely for the neighbours to be unaware of what event is taking place in a particular household, in a Lambada Thanda all the residents are fully involved. Whether it is the religious festivals, or the happy events like engagements or weddings, the Naik of the Thanda is an important player in the related negotiations. This is certainly a departure from the modern style engagements and weddings, where it is only the family members, other relatives and friends who play important roles in such events. Even in the case of deaths, the entire community pitches in with donations to meet the funeral costs and the subsequent 'mandatory' feeding of persons, as a mark of respect to the departed soul.

To present a more balanced picture, the adverse effect of modernisation in areas like religious conversions, dress, food habits, life cycle rituals, and celebration of festivals, dances and the institutions of local self-governance were presented in a candid manner. It became clear that modernisation has brought out both positive and negative changes in the community. The positives include: greater awareness about issues of immediate concern to the community, better health practices, increased literacy rates and access to alternative sources of employment (since agricultural income is tending to become increasingly un-remunerative). Education is also enabling people to articulate their legitimate demands and resist the exploitative practices of outsiders like contractors and moneylenders. A positive impact of religious conversions is that now there is lesser reliance on superstitions. In this context, one cannot ignore the number of schools and medical centres being run in these areas, especially by the Christian missionaries.

A very positive impact of modernisation has been in the area of health. An increasing number of Lambada women are opting for deliveries in hospitals, where adequately trained doctors and other medical personnel are available. This has significantly reduced the instances of women and babies dying due to medical complications. Now greater care is being given to issues like inoculation of infants and ante and post natal care of pregnant women. The campaigns regarding proper sanitation have reduced the cases of ill-health due to communicable diseases.

The most dysfunctional change due to modernisation has been regarding the institution of marriage. Earlier, the system of bride price was in vogue. Here too, the 'price' was mostly in terms of heads of cattle or poultry. It is now becoming increasingly common for bridegrooms to demand dowry in the form of large sums of money, jewellery, property, etc. This is leading to an increase in the incidents of domestic violence on the ground of 'insufficient dowry'. The weddings, which were earlier spread over three months to nine days, are now tending to be one

day affairs – that too in function halls. The songs and dances, associated with almost every stage of a traditional Lambada wedding, face the risk of soon passing into oblivion.

The songs on the occasion of marriage tended to include almost all stages of the ceremony – right from the engagement, bath given to the bridal couple to the send off given to the marriage party. These combined elements like sentiment, humour, teasing, counseling, sadness at parting, love of the parents towards their children. A remarkable feature of these had been the enthusiastic participation of elderly women in these songs. Such has been the strength of the institution of marriage in the Lambada community. However, as already mentioned, the trend is towards pomp, show and noise and less of respect for the traditional values.

The ‘curse’ of the ‘modern’ system of dowry is also being reflected in the increase in the number of cases of female infanticide. Parents of such children appear to be operating on the perception that such a drastic action would save them from a heavy financial burden in the future.

One remarkable aspect of the animistic religion was the gratitude expressed to the various natural forces and elements like water bodies, trees and stones and remembering the ancestors. The traditional festivals conveyed a degree of spontaneity and true devotion. Celebrations of the more ‘modern’ religious festivals, on the other hand, have tended to be more boisterous and occasions for spending a lot of money, even if the ‘newly converted devotees’ do not fully understand the actual significance of the particular festival. One can also notice a spurt in the number of temples being constructed even in lambada Thandas.

An area of some concern is that of the Lambada language. Due to the fact that this does not have a script of its own and the greater allure of the ‘mainstream’ languages like English, Hindi and Telugu, there is also the risk of the Lambada folk songs, folklore and legends (orally transmitted

from one generation to another) becoming extinct, unless ways and means are devised to ensure that this language continues for posterity. The educated Lambadas should act as torch-bearers of their community and help the scholars and researchers in the task of documenting the best elements of the Lambada language. Since members of the Lambada community can be found in several states of the country, the campaign for preserving and enriching the Lambada language should be an all-India effort – involving the community members present all over the country - since this cannot be successfully handled by residents of a few isolated Thandas.

One area where the impact of modernisation cannot be termed as totally dysfunctional is that of attire. The traditional attire of the Lambadas, especially the women, is very intricate with ornaments and beads worn into it. The rising costs of the raw materials that go into making such dresses are making these costly. Also, these could be heavy and inconvenient in urban settings. As a result, the Lambada dresses are tending to be treated as show pieces – to be worn only on festive occasions.

The dilemma of tradition vs. modernity can be resolved by synergising the best elements of both so that the future generations of the Lambadas continue to be proud of their culture and traditions, while adapting to the positive changes being brought about by modernity.

It is clear that no community, today, can escape the winds of change. Wisdom lies in not being overwhelmed by these. An effort needs to be made to arrive at a happy marriage between the positive elements of both tradition and modernity. Any tradition evolves over a long period of time. To this elements like felt experience and native wisdom are added. Hence, tradition should never be treated dismissively. The songs, dances, folklore, fables, etc., of any community, however primitive it may be, all carry a wealth of wisdom and practical knowledge.

It is the love for their respective tradition that has helped communities to retain their distinct identity all these years. True, there may be some dysfunctional aspects like superstitions that need to be countered by rationality and a scientific outlook, but it would be totally unwise to totally discard one's tradition.

The communities that were till very recently denied access to education are in a more advantaged position now. The members of such communities should fully utilize these and other facilities so as to improve their quality of life. Already many Lambadas are accessing such facilities. It is very important for them to not confine the benefits to themselves. They need to act as cultural ambassadors for the community and impress on the mainstream community about their culture and traditions. The emphasis should be on stressed that the Lambadas are a well-developed race in their own way and that they have several issues on which they are even better than the others. These include: respect for elders (reflected in the very eminent position accorded to the Naiks and other village elders during events like engagements, weddings and religious festivals), consideration for women (this is evident from the fact that widow remarriage is not frowned upon) and the strengths of the traditional panchayats (Nasab) over the 'state imposed' one. The Nasab operates on the immense faith in the morality and fair play of the Naik and other members of the Panchayat. All disputes are sought to be resolved in the most impartial manner. The punishments are such that the wrong-doer would think twice before repeating the offence. Such is the respect that these panchayats are still commanding in the community.

On the other hand, the statutory panchayats, despite the noble intentions underlying these, have a number of drawbacks. These include: the scope for political parties for interfering even in local matters, possible high-handedness of bureaucrats and the specific needs of the residents of a particular Thanda being ignored due to 'tyranny of the majority'. A statutory panchayat can

have persons belonging to various social classes. In these, the politically and financially stronger elements have ample scope to force their will on the rest of the members.

A lot has been said about the 'adequate' representation of women and members of other weaker sections of society in such institutions of self governance. But then, can any person guarantee that such representatives are able to freely express their felt needs. Is there not a risk of, say, the father, husband, brother, etc., of an 'elected' woman panchayat member determining how she will perform in the sittings of the panchayat? It is, therefore, not surprising that a strong demand is gaining ground for having exclusive Panchayats for the Lambadas. Once this concept takes root, it would be possible to have traditional Panchayats that would also incorporate the progressive features envisaged in the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74 Constitutional Amendments Acts.

Government needs to be a major player in the task of synergizing the best of tradition and modernity. It is customary for government to announce a plethora of developmental schemes. However, due to the widespread illiteracy among the Lambadas, the government should also ensure that majority of the intended beneficiaries are made aware of these. Electronic and print media may not be very effective communication means for this purpose. Another issue that the government needs to consider seriously is whether the schemes are actually required by the community. For instance, what is the wisdom in distributing free TV sets (especially at the time of elections) to people in a place where the power supply is virtually non-existent?

