

Research Article

Forging Telangana: Caste, Culture, and Identity in a Dynamic Deccan Landscape

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Abstract

Telangana, carved as India's 29th state in 2014 after decades of agitation, embodies a vibrant socio-cultural identity forged through layered historical, caste-based, religious, and artistic forces on the Deccan plateau. From Satavahana-era Buddhist-Jain influences and Kakatiya patronage of Prakrit arts to the Nizam's syncretic Hyderabad era, the region's ethos blends diverse traditions, often overshadowed by Andhra dominance post-1956 merger. The Telangana movement weaponized folk songs, festivals, and linguistic pride—rooted in rural folk forms like Oggukatha and Burrakatha—to rally against feudal exploitation, resource inequities, and cultural erasure, culminating in statehood.

Caste and religion remain pivotal markers, as Ambedkar argued in Annihilation of Caste, structuring hierarchies that privilege upper castes while marginalizing Dalits, OBCs, STs, and minorities (89% of the population per Srikrishna Committee, 2010). Ilaiah's *Why I Am Not a Hindu* illuminates Telangana's distinct "bahujan" consciousness, where lower-caste rituals, fairs, and spiritual practices challenge Brahmanical norms amid 85.1% Hindu, 12.7% Muslim demographics (2011 Census). Folk arts evolved into protest anthems, addressing social exclusions like bonded labor, gender inequities, droughts, and suicides, fostering collective identity from the 1940s armed struggle to post-2014 revival.

This analysis reveals Telangana's identity as fluid—balancing state-led heritage preservation with urbanization—while underscoring the need to safeguard intangible elements like folk traditions against modernization. By intertwining political mobilization with cultural revival, Telangana exemplifies regionalism's role in equitable modernization, offering lessons for India's federal diversity.

Keywords: Caste hierarchy, Folk mobilization, regional identity, Cultural revival, social justice.

Introduction

Telangana's emergence as India's 29th state on June 2, 2014, marked the culmination of a protracted struggle that reshaped the nation's federal contours. Born from decades of grassroots agitation, this bifurcation of the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh state was not merely administrative but a profound assertion of socio-cultural identity. Situated on the Deccan plateau, Telangana's ethos weaves together ancient historical layers— from Satavahana-era Buddhist and Jain influences to the Kakatiya dynasty's patronage of Prakrit literature and temple architecture—with colonial interruptions and the Nizam of Hyderabad's syncretic rule. This blend, however, faced erasure post-1956 when the Telugu-speaking regions merged under linguistic reorganization, subordinating Telangana's distinct rural folk traditions to Andhra's coastal dominance.

The Telangana movement, spanning from the 1969 student-led protests to the 2009 hunger strike by K. Chandrashekar Rao (KCR), weaponized cultural elements like folk songs, festivals, and linguistic pride. Forms such as Oggukatha (a storytelling ballad) and Burrakatha (a narrative folk

theater) transformed from rural entertainments into anthems of resistance against feudal landlordism, irrigation inequities, and cultural marginalization. Caste and religion, as B.R. Ambedkar critiqued in *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), underpin these hierarchies, privileging upper castes while sidelining Dalits, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and minorities—who constitute nearly 89% of the population according to the Srikrishna Committee Report (2010). Kancha Ilaiah's *Why I Am Not a Hindu* (1996) further illuminates a burgeoning "bahujan" consciousness in Telangana, where lower-caste rituals and fairs challenge Brahmanical hegemony amid a demographic of 85.1% Hindus and 12.7% Muslims (Census of India, 2011).

This paper argues that Telangana's identity is fluid and dynamic, balancing state-led heritage preservation with urbanization's pressures. It examines how folk arts evolved into tools of protest, addressing bonded labor, gender inequities, droughts, and farmer suicides from the 1940s armed struggle against the Nizam to post-2014 cultural revival. By intertwining political mobilization with cultural assertion, Telangana exemplifies regionalism's potential for equitable modernization, offering lessons for India's federal diversity. The analysis unfolds through historical foundations, caste-religion dynamics, cultural mobilization, post-statehood transformations, and policy implications, underscoring the imperative to safeguard intangible heritage.

Historical Foundations of Telangana's Identity

Telangana's socio-cultural tapestry originates in the Deccan plateau's ancient civilizations, where diverse influences converged. The Satavahana dynasty (c. 230 BCE–220 CE), centered in modern Telangana, fostered Buddhist and Jain centers like Nelakondapalli and Dhulikatta, promoting Prakrit as a literary medium that bridged Vedic Sanskrit with Dravidian vernaculars. Archaeological evidence reveals stupas and viharas symbolizing egalitarian spiritual practices, contrasting later caste rigidities (Ray, 2017). The Kakatiya rulers (1163–1323 CE), from Warangal's thousand-pillared temple, elevated Telugu-Prakrit arts, commissioning poets like Tikkana and erecting Ramappa Temple—a UNESCO site exemplifying Vesara architecture's fusion of Dravidian and Nagara styles.

The medieval period saw Bahmani Sultanate and Qutb Shahi incursions, but the Asaf Jahi Nizams (1724–1948) defined Hyderabad's syncretic ethos. Nizam VII, Osman Ali Khan, blended Persianate administration with Hindu agrarian systems, fostering Diwani courts and Urdu-Hyderabad cuisine. Yet, this era entrenched feudal jagirdari—land grants to loyalists—exploiting ryots through rack-renting and vetti (bonded labor). The 1946–47 Telangana Armed Struggle, led by the Communist Party of India (CPI), mobilized 3,000 villages against the Razakars, achieving land reforms that redistributed 4.5 million acres but sowed seeds of regional grievance (Sundarayya, 1972).

Post-independence, the 1956 States Reorganization Act merged Telangana with Andhra, promising safeguards like the Gentlemen's Agreement (1969). These faltered amid Andhra migration, irrigation disparities (e.g., Sriram Sagar Project favoring coastal areas), and job quotas favoring Seemandhra settlers. By the 1990s, GDP per capita in Telangana lagged 30% behind Andhra, fueling the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS, now BRS)'s campaign. Statehood in 2014, via the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, rectified this, allocating 10 districts and Hyderabad as a joint capital till 2024.

This history reveals identity as a palimpsest: ancient pluralism overlaid by feudal inequities, colonial syncretism, and post-merger alienation. Folk forms like Oggukatha—sung by bards recounting Kakatiya valor—preserved oral histories, evolving into critiques of Nizam-era oppression.

Caste Hierarchies and Religious Syncretism

Caste, as Ambedkar posited, is not primordial but a graded inequality enforced through endogamy and ritual purity, annihilating which requires dismantling Hinduism's scriptural basis (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). In Telangana, upper castes (Reddys, Velamas, Brahmins—~10%) dominate politics and land (52% holdings per 2015–16 Agricultural Census), while Dalits (16.2%), OBCs (50%), STs (9.3%), and Muslims (12.7%) face systemic exclusion. The Srikrishna Committee (2010) quantified this: 89% non-upper castes bore 70% poverty, with Dalit atrocity cases rising 25% post-merger.

Ilaiah's framework highlights Telangana's "bahujan" ethos—non-Brahmanical practices among Sudras and Ati-Sudras. Unlike North India's Sanskritized Hinduism, Telangana's fairs like Sammakka Saralamma Jatara (attended by 1.3 crore in 2024) honor tribal goddesses, blending animism with bhakti. Lower-caste rituals—Peerla Panduga (Muslim saints' festivals shared by Hindus) and Bonalu (Goddess Mahakali worship)—foster syncretism. The 2011 Census underscores this: 85.1% Hindus, but with 4.2% Christians and tribal faiths resisting conversion pressures.

Gender intersects caste: Dalit women endure 40% of reported rapes (NCRB, 2023), amplified by feudal remnants. Ambedkarite movements, via the Telangana Dalit Mahasabha, invoke the Constitution's Article 17 (untouchability abolition) and 46 (SC welfare), yet implementation lags. Post-statehood, BRS's 42% women MLAs (2018) and Ambedkar statues proliferation signal shifts, but 2023 caste census demands persist.

Religion adds layers: Hyderabad's Old City, with Charminar and Mecca Masjid, embodies Nizam-era tolerance, yet communal riots (e.g., 1990s) expose fault lines. Bahujan consciousness, per Ilaiah, challenges this via "productivist" castes' (e.g., Golla shepherds) folk narratives rejecting Brahmanical karma.

Cultural Mobilization: Folk Arts as Protest Vehicles

Folk arts galvanized the movement, transforming from entertainment to resistance. Burrakatha, a trio performance with sargam (melody), tappeta (drum), and harmonium, narrated anti-Nizam exploits; Gaddar (1950–2023), its iconic voice, composed "Palle Raallu Panchalu Raallu" decrying bonded labor. Oggukatha, by duos wielding sticks (okka and goppa katha), chronicled droughts and suicides—e.g., 1,500+ farmer deaths in 2019 (official data).

Festivals weaponized identity: Bathukamma (women's floral festival) symbolized gender resilience amid suicides (Telangana topped India's female farmer suicides, 22% share, 2022 NCRB). Linguistic pride countered Andhra's "Greater Telugu" narrative; Telangana dialect's vachakam (proverbs) like "Telangana vaadini vaipu choodu" rallied diaspora.

From 1940s CPI struggles to 2010s TRS rallies, these arts addressed exclusions: bonded labor (eradicated via 1976 Bonded Labour Act but persisting in 10% rural households, 2020 NSSO); gender inequities (female LFPR 32%, below national 37%, PLFS 2023); droughts (Godavari basin 60% rainfed); suicides (4,000+ annually, 2014–24). Post-2014, state initiatives like Telangana Folk Arts Academy revived 50+ forms, integrating them into school curricula.

This mobilization forged collective identity, blending rural ethos with urban aspirations, as seen in Hyderabad's Potu Vadi graffiti art echoing folk motifs.

The Telangana Movement: From Agitation to Statehood

The movement's arc spans phases. 1969's Jai Telangana protests demanded safeguards; 1972 Mulki Rules upheld quotas but sparked violence. 1990s economic disparities—Telangana's 40% revenue contribution but 30% expenditure—ignited TRS in 2001. KCR's 2009 fast catalyzed national attention, yielding the Srikrishna Report's six options, favoring status quo but overridden by UPA-II's 2014 Act.

Caste infused mobilization: Reddy leaders like KCR navigated OBC-Dalit coalitions, while Dalit outfits like Jago Telangana demanded reservations. Women activists, via Mana Ooru Mana Badi, highlighted education gaps (Telangana literacy 66.5% vs. Andhra 67.0%, 2011).

Post-statehood, challenges persist: Hyderabad's urbanization (population 10.2 million, 2024 est.) dilutes rural identity, yet policies like TS-iPASS (industrial hubs) balance growth with heritage.

Post-Statehood Transformations: Preservation Amid Modernization

Statehood ushered revival. The Telangana State Portal archives 200+ folk songs; Kakatiya festivals draw 50 lakh annually. Yet, urbanization erodes: 45% urban population (2023), youth prefer K-pop over Burrakatha. COVID-19 accelerated digital shifts, with virtual Bathukamma in 2020.

Caste policies advanced: 42A amendment enhanced OBC quotas; 2023 caste survey promises equity. Religion: 2024 Waqf Act amendments sparked debates on minority rights. Identity remains fluid, negotiating globalization.

Statehood in 2014 marked a cultural renaissance for Telangana, breathing new life into its heritage while confronting the tensions of rapid modernization. The official Telangana State Portal

now safeguards over 200 folk songs, digitizing treasures like Oggukatha ballads and Yakshagana narratives that once echoed in rural gatherings. This archival effort ensures transmission to future generations amid fading oral traditions. Similarly, the resurgence of Kakatiya-era festivals, such as the grand Kakatiya Festival in Warangal, attracts nearly 50 lakh visitors each year, blending historical reenactments with contemporary performances to celebrate the dynasty's architectural legacy and medieval glory.

However, urbanization poses a stealthy threat. By 2023, 45% of Telangana's population had shifted to cities, fueling a migration from villages to Hyderabad's tech hubs. This demographic pivot dilutes rural customs; young urbanites increasingly embrace global pop sensations like K-pop, sidelining indigenous Burrakatha storytelling, once a staple of public discourse on epics and social issues. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these fractures, prompting a pivot to digital realms—virtual Bathukamma celebrations in 2020, with women sharing flower arrangements online, preserved rituals but stripped them of communal vibrancy and sensory immersion.

On the policy front, caste reforms signal progressive strides toward social equity. The 42A constitutional amendment bolstered OBC reservations, expanding access to education and jobs for marginalized communities long overlooked in Andhra Pradesh's unified framework. The 2023 state-wide caste census further commits to data-driven affirmative action, aiming to recalibrate resource allocation and political representation for backward classes.

Religious dynamics add layers of contention. The 2024 Waqf Act amendments ignited fierce debates, with critics arguing they encroach on Muslim endowments and minority autonomy, while proponents see them as streamlining land management for development. These changes highlight Telangana's balancing act between secular governance and faith-based claims.

Ultimately, Telangana's post-statehood identity flows like the Musi River—fluid, resilient, and adaptive. It negotiates globalization's pull through hybrid expressions: fusion music festivals merging folk beats with EDM, or policy innovations embedding cultural quotas in urban planning. Preservation thrives not in isolation but through reinvention, ensuring traditions evolve without erasure.

Challenges and Policy Implications

Safeguarding intangibles demands policy: UNESCO-like listings for Oggukatha; GI tags for Pochampally ikat. Regionalism lessons: Equitable federalism via Article 371D.

Safeguarding India's rich cultural intangibles, such as oral traditions and artisanal crafts, requires robust policy frameworks to prevent erosion amid globalization and urbanization. Oggukatha, a vibrant storytelling art form from Telangana, exemplifies this urgency. Performed by itinerant bards using rhythmic ballads accompanied by tambura and sarangi, it narrates epics like the Ramayana with local flavors, preserving community histories and moral lessons. Yet, digital media and migration threaten its survival, with practitioners dwindling. A

UNESCO-like listing, akin to the Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), could elevate Oggukatha globally. This would mandate national inventories, community involvement in transmission, and international funding for festivals and training workshops. India, already home to 15 ICH elements on UNESCO's list like Kutiyattam theatre, could nominate Oggukatha through the Ministry of Culture, fostering pride and economic viability via tourism circuits in Warangal and surrounding districts.

Complementing this, Geographical Indication (GI) tags offer legal protection for tangible expressions of intangible heritage, particularly Pochampally ikat—a Telangana silk weaving technique renowned for its geometric patterns dyed with natural indigo and myrobalan. Originating from Pochampally village, this craft embodies generational knowledge passed through family looms, supporting over 10,000 weavers. Granted GI status in 2005, it combats counterfeits flooding markets from power looms in Surat. However, enforcement remains weak; policy must strengthen via dedicated GI cells under the Commerce Ministry, integrating blockchain for traceability. This not only boosts artisan incomes—premium ikat fetches 30-50% higher prices—but also links to skill development under the Atmanirbhar Bharat scheme, training youth in sustainable dyeing to counter synthetic alternatives.

These efforts highlight broader regionalism lessons for equitable federalism. Telangana's cultural assertions, from state formation in 2014 to protecting local arts, underscore tensions in India's asymmetric federal structure. Article 371D, unique to Andhra Pradesh and Telangana post-bifurcation, mandates equitable opportunities in public employment and education through a Backward Classes Welfare Department. It allocates posts regionally—60% local quota in Zone-VI—addressing Hyderabad's urban-rural divide. Yet, challenges persist: litigation over reservations erodes trust, while fiscal imbalances strain state capacities for cultural preservation.

Policy implications demand integrated reforms. First, a National Intangible Heritage Authority could coordinate UNESCO bids and GI enforcement, with state-level bodies like Telangana's Culture Department leading grassroots documentation. Second, federal grants under Article 275 should prioritize regional ICH funds, ensuring non-metropolitan areas like Warangal access schemes bypassing Delhi-centric biases. Third, public-private partnerships—e.g., weaver cooperatives with e-commerce giants—can scale markets while Article 371D-inspired quotas extend to cultural jobs, training 5,000 Oggukatha artists annually. Finally, digital archives via the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts preserve ephemera, countering homogenization.

Such measures transform challenges into opportunities, reinforcing cultural federalism. By embedding intangibles in policy, India averts loss, promotes inclusive growth, and models global heritage equity.

Conclusion

Telangana forges identity through caste critique, cultural revival, modeling India's diversity. Telangana's journey to statehood exemplifies how a potent critique of caste hierarchies, intertwined with cultural revival, has forged a resilient regional identity that mirrors and enriches India's pluralistic mosaic. Emerging from decades of agrarian unrest and marginalization under Andhra Pradesh's dominance, the movement channeled Ambedkarite ideals to dismantle entrenched caste privileges, prioritizing land reforms and affirmative action for backward classes and Adivasis. This wasn't mere rhetoric; leaders like K. Chandrashekar Rao mobilized Dalit and OBC communities, transforming socioeconomic grievances into a political force that secured bifurcation in 2014.

Cultural revival amplified this identity-building. The reclamation of Bathukamma and Bonalu festivals, alongside the resurgence of Telugu folk arts and Telangana dialect in literature and media, countered cultural erasure. Initiatives like the Telangana Sahitya Akademi and state-sponsored heritage projects have revitalized regional narratives, embedding pride in Kakatiya-era architecture and tribal lore. Hyderabad's evolution into a global tech hub, while preserving its Deccani ethos, underscores this synthesis—modern aspirations rooted in indigenous ethos.

Yet, Telangana's model extends beyond itself, offering a blueprint for India's diversity. It demonstrates how subnational identities can thrive within federalism, challenging Brahminical dominance without fracturing national unity. By integrating caste equity with cultural assertion, it inspires states like Maharashtra and Bihar to pursue similar paths. Challenges persist—urban-rural divides and intra-caste tensions demand vigilant policy-making—but the state's success lies in its adaptive resilience.

Ultimately, Telangana redefines Indian federalism as a dynamic arena where caste critique fuels empowerment, cultural revival nurtures belonging, and diversity becomes strength. This forges not just a state, but a microcosm of India's syncretic democracy, proving that identity rooted in justice can harmonize multiplicity into enduring progress.

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