

Colonialism and the Making of Koya Identity: Rebellion, Land, and Anthropology in the Eastern Ghats, 1839–1924

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ABSTRACT

The Koyas, an Adivasi community inhabiting the forested and mountainous tracts of the Eastern Ghats, encountered profound transformations with the expansion of colonial authority into the region. British intervention sought not only to bring these relatively autonomous territories within the colonial administrative framework but also to regulate their land, forests, labour, and natural resources. Koya resistance to these interventions generated a substantial body of colonial administrative and ethnographic writing. These writings did more than record rebellion: they participated in the production of knowledge through which the Koyas were classified, represented, and governed.

This article examines the construction of Koya identity in colonial discourse between 1839 and 1924, with particular attention to the Agency tracts of the Godavari and Khammam regions of present-day Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. It argues that colonial representations of the Koyas developed through interconnected processes of administrative intervention, regulation of podu cultivation, transformation of the muttadari system, interpretation of rebellion, and the emergence of colonial anthropology. Practices that were integral to Koya social and economic life were increasingly represented as primitive, irrational, or destructive. Similarly, political resistance was frequently interpreted as disorder or criminality rather than as a defence of autonomy, land, and customary rights. Colonial ethnographic descriptions further reinforced these representations by locating the Koyas within categories such as “aboriginal,” “tribal,” “primitive,” and “junglemen.” The article therefore argues that colonial knowledge was not simply descriptive; it was constitutive of the political identity through which the Koyas came to be governed.

INTRODUCTION

The Koyas are one of the prominent Adivasi communities inhabiting the forest and hill tracts of present-day Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana. Their historical settlements were concentrated in the Eastern Ghats, particularly in the Agency tracts associated with the Godavari region. The geographical character of this region was central to Koya social and economic life. The Eastern Ghats rise from the coastal plains towards the Deccan uplands, while the Godavari and its tributaries pass through the narrow and mountainous terrain of the Papi Hills before reaching the plains.

The forests and hills of this region constituted much more than a geographical environment. They formed the material, social, and cultural basis of Koya life. Sacred landscapes such as Bairavakondai and Papikondalu were associated with spirits and ritual practices, while forests supplied food, fuel, medicinal plants, and other resources. In the early twentieth century, the upland forests of Polavaram, Yellavaram, Rampa, Bhadrachalam, and Rekapalle supplied a range of forest products, including tamarind, gall nuts, honey, soap nuts, animal skins and horns, platter leaves, and medicinal substances such as nux vomica. Colonial records indicate that such products entered wider commercial networks and were exported to places including London and France. In 1904–05, the government reportedly derived approximately Rs. 43,000 from these forest products.¹

The incorporation of the region into colonial rule therefore had significant implications for Koya society. The colonial state encountered a social order in which land, forests, cultivation, political authority, and community

life were organized according to institutions that did not conform to the emerging colonial conception of property and administration. The subsequent attempt to reorganize these relationships became one of the major sources of conflict between the Koyas and the colonial state.

This article examines one particular dimension of this encounter: the construction of Koya identity in colonial discourse. Rather than treating colonial descriptions of the Koyas as neutral ethnographic observations, it considers them as forms of knowledge produced within a particular political context. The article focuses especially on the relationship between rebellion and representation. The argument is that colonial interventions first generated conflicts over land, cultivation, authority, and revenue; colonial officials then interpreted those conflicts through categories that portrayed the Koyas as primitive, disorderly, or resistant to civilization. These representations subsequently became part of the administrative knowledge through which Koya society was governed.

Forest, Land, and Podu Cultivation

The forest was fundamental to the economic life of Koya communities. It provided access to a wide range of products that could be consumed locally or exchanged through wider markets. At the same time, forests constituted an important agricultural space. Koya communities practised shifting cultivation, commonly referred to as podu, which involved clearing and cultivating portions of forest land before allowing the land to regenerate.

The practice involved clearing selected areas through cutting and burning, generally during March, followed by sowing in June. Two forms of cultivation are identified in the sources: chalaka podu and konda podu. In chalaka podu, land could be cultivated for approximately two years before being left to regenerate. In konda podu, after cultivation and harvesting, the cleared area was abandoned and allowed to return gradually to forest.²

From the perspective of Koya communities, therefore, podu formed part of an established relationship between cultivation, forest regeneration, and community life. Colonial officials, however, increasingly interpreted the practice through a different conceptual framework. Shifting cultivation was represented as primitive, wasteful, and incompatible with scientific forest management.

This difference was not merely a disagreement about agricultural technique. It reflected fundamentally different understandings of land and property. Colonial administration increasingly sought to identify fixed holdings, establish recognizable proprietorship, assess revenue, and regulate forest use. Podu, by contrast, did not easily fit within these categories. Its mobility and collective character made it difficult to incorporate into a system based upon fixed property and regular taxation.

Consequently, colonial opposition to podu was simultaneously an environmental, administrative, and fiscal project. The practice was criticized as destructive to forests, while the absence of clearly defined individual ownership made the land difficult to incorporate into the revenue system. Colonial representations of podu thus transformed an established form of cultivation into a problem requiring state intervention.³

The social organization surrounding podu was equally significant. Cultivation was often undertaken collectively by extended families and clans, and its produce circulated among kin and community members. Such practices reinforced social relations based on reciprocity and collective responsibility.⁴ The colonial emphasis on individualized property and taxation therefore challenged not merely an agricultural practice but also the social relations through which land was understood and used.

The Muttadari System and the Reorganization of Koya Authority

The difficulties of imposing a conventional revenue and administrative system on the Agency tracts also influenced colonial relations with Koya political institutions. In the absence of a comprehensive survey and settlement, colonial authorities relied to a considerable extent upon existing political structures, particularly the muttadari system. Koya settlements were organized into territorial units known as *Samutu*. According to F. R. Hemingway, a *Samutu* consisted of approximately twenty-five Koya villages.⁵ The *Samutu* occupied a position above the village and below the *Mutta*. Within this political structure, authority was exercised by local chiefs

known as muttadars.

The muttadars performed important administrative and judicial functions and acted as intermediaries between the colonial state and local communities. Their authority enabled the colonial government to extend its influence into areas where direct administration remained difficult.⁶ In this sense, the early colonial state did not simply replace indigenous political institutions; it initially depended upon and incorporated them. Yet this relationship changed as colonial administration became more intrusive. The incorporation of the muttadari system into the colonial structure altered the nature of the authority exercised by the muttadars. Their position increasingly shifted from that of autonomous or semi-autonomous local authorities towards that of agents responsible for revenue collection. In the course of this transformation, the political authority associated with the muttadar was progressively weakened.⁷

A revealing colonial description characterized the inhabitants of the Agency as “civilized yet unconquered Barbarians.” The phrase captures an important contradiction within colonial discourse. The Koyas were acknowledged as possessing organized social and political institutions, yet their autonomy was simultaneously interpreted as evidence of their incomplete incorporation into the colonial state. Their relative independence was attributed not to political sovereignty or historical autonomy but to the geographical difficulty of the terrain and the supposed poverty of the region.⁸

Colonial intervention thus transformed the relationship between political authority and the state. The muttadar increasingly became a rent-collecting intermediary rather than an autonomous political authority. The restructuring of the institution was consequently part of a wider process through which Koya political autonomy was subordinated to colonial administrative requirements.⁹

The transformation of land relations, restrictions on podu cultivation, changes in revenue arrangements, and the weakening of traditional political authority contributed to growing tensions between the Koyas and the colonial state. These tensions were expressed through a series of uprisings and acts of resistance during the nineteenth century and culminated in later movements, including the Manyam rebellion of 1922–24.

The rebellions between 1839 and 1862 represented more than spontaneous disturbances. They emerged within a context in which colonial intervention increasingly affected the material and political foundations of Koya society. Restrictions on cultivation, taxation, interference in customary institutions, and the erosion of local authority generated resistance to the expanding colonial order.¹⁰

The term *fituri*, frequently used in colonial records to describe such disturbances, is itself significant. Colonial terminology converted political resistance into a category of administrative disorder. By naming rebellion in this manner, the colonial state framed the event from the perspective of its own administrative legitimacy rather than from the standpoint of those participating in the resistance.

This is particularly important for understanding the production of historical knowledge. Colonial officials frequently neutralized or displaced the political causes articulated through rebellion. Instead of recognizing resistance as a struggle over land, political authority, customary practices, or autonomy, colonial accounts often represented it as the product of individual disorder, ignorance, intoxication, superstition, or manipulation.

As Atlury Murali has demonstrated in relation to the 1922–24 rebellion, colonial explanations of tribal insurgency also functioned as forms of political legitimation. The identification of “causes” was not an innocent analytical exercise: it could serve to invalidate the political objectives of those who rebelled.¹¹ Colonial discourse thus performed a dual function. It recorded resistance while simultaneously producing an interpretation through which resistance could be rendered illegitimate.

It was within this context of political confrontation that colonial authorities increasingly constructed a distinctive identity for the Koyas. Resistance to colonial authority was interpreted as evidence of a failure to attain what colonial officials understood as “civilization.” The Koyas were increasingly positioned within categories such as “tribal,” “primitive,” “aboriginal,” and “junglemen.”

Such categories were not simply descriptive labels. They created a hierarchy between the colonial state and the communities it sought to govern. The state appeared as the representative of civilization, rational administration, settled agriculture, and modern property relations, while the Koyas were positioned as representatives of an earlier and supposedly inferior stage of social development.

The representation of *podu* offers a clear example. A system of cultivation adapted to the forest environment was interpreted as primitive agriculture. Collective forms of land use were treated as evidence of the absence of proper property rights. Resistance to state intervention was interpreted as hostility to civilization. Through these representations, the same practices that sustained Koya society could be transformed into evidence of Koya backwardness.

The colonial construction of identity therefore operated through a process of inversion. The consequences of colonial intervention were often presented as characteristics of the Koyas themselves. Their resistance to administrative incorporation became evidence of their supposed primitiveness; their continued dependence on forests became evidence of savagery; and their refusal to conform to colonial property arrangements became evidence of their lack of civilization.

Colonial anthropology provided an additional intellectual framework through which these identities were consolidated. European travellers had been producing descriptions of Indian societies from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed an increasing involvement of colonial officials, missionaries, surveyors, and Orientalist scholars in the production of knowledge about Indian society. Knowledge production was closely connected to colonial governance. Descriptions of communities, their customs, religions, political institutions, and physical characteristics became part of the classificatory apparatus through which colonial territories were understood and administered. Orientalist representations of Indian society as ancient and timeless contributed to new ways of organizing Indian populations through categories such as caste, tribe, race, and religion.

In the case of the Koyas, ethnographic and administrative descriptions repeatedly associated them with the forest, isolation, superstition, intoxication, and primitiveness. One early colonial reference reportedly classified the hill tribes within a “Hindu Race”¹² Such classifications reveal the instability of colonial knowledge: indigenous communities could simultaneously be incorporated into broader Hindu categories and differentiated from settled populations as “aboriginal” or “tribal.”

Colonial descriptions also referred to the Koyas as “Junglemen,” portraying them as timid, frequently intoxicated, and unusually truthful.¹³ Such descriptions appear contradictory, but their very combination illustrates how ethnographic writing produced a recognizable colonial stereotype. The Koya was simultaneously imagined as physically robust and socially backward, truthful yet uncivilized, attached to the forest yet incapable of properly managing it.

Religious practices were similarly represented through categories of superstition and barbarity. Colonial accounts associated Koya religious beliefs with human sacrifice, black magic, and witchcraft.¹⁴ Such descriptions transformed unfamiliar religious practices into evidence of primitiveness. Rather than approaching Koya religious life on its own conceptual terms, colonial observers interpreted it through a hierarchy in which European rationality occupied the superior position.

Another colonial writer described the Koyas as an “aboriginal race” that had been pushed into the forests and hills as a consequence of Brahmanical invasions.¹⁵ This interpretation is significant because it located Koya society within a broader historical narrative of displacement. The forest was thus represented simultaneously as a space of refuge and as evidence of social marginality. The Koyas were imagined as a population pushed to the geographical periphery and consequently preserved in a supposedly earlier stage of social development.

The colonial stereotype of the Koya as isolated and unsophisticated therefore depended upon a particular understanding of space. The forest and hills were transformed from lived social landscapes into geographical markers of primitiveness. Residence in the forest became evidence of isolation; isolation became evidence

of backwardness; and backwardness became a justification for colonial intervention.

The construction of Koya identity cannot therefore be separated from the history of colonial expansion. The categories through which the Koyas were described emerged within a political relationship characterized by attempts to regulate land, forests, cultivation, revenue, and political authority. Colonial anthropology did not merely observe these transformations. It helped give them intellectual coherence. The representation of the Koyas as primitive, superstitious, isolated, or “jungle” people made colonial intervention appear necessary and legitimate. If podu was primitive, its regulation could be represented as forest conservation. If Koya political institutions were backward, their restructuring could be represented as administrative reform. If rebellion was the product of ignorance or criminality, its suppression could be represented as the restoration of order.

This process also affected the historical representation of Koya resistance. The colonial state possessed the institutional authority to produce official records, reports, gazetteers, surveys, and ethnographic accounts. Consequently, the language through which rebellion entered the archive was frequently the language of the state itself. The political claims of the rebels could therefore disappear behind administrative categories such as disturbance, fituri, disorder, or criminality.

The colonial archive must consequently be read not simply as a repository of information about the Koyas but as a site in which Koya identity was produced and contested. Colonial descriptions tell us not only about how officials viewed the Koyas but also about the political objectives and conceptual assumptions of the colonial state.

CONCLUSION

The history of the Koyas under colonial rule demonstrates that identity was not merely inherited or passively recorded. It was actively constructed through encounters between an expanding colonial state and an Adivasi society possessing its own systems of land use, political authority, social organization, and religious practice.

The transformation of podu cultivation, the incorporation and restructuring of the muttadari system, and the suppression and interpretation of rebellion were central to this process. Practices that had long formed part of Koya social life were increasingly redefined through colonial categories of property, revenue, conservation, civilization, and order. At the same time, colonial anthropology supplied a vocabulary through which the Koyas could be represented as “aboriginal,” “tribal,” “primitive,” or “junglemen.”

The significance of these representations lies in their political consequences. Colonial knowledge did not simply describe an already existing Koya identity; it participated in producing an identity that made particular forms of governance appear necessary. The Koya was constructed as a subject who required administration, regulation, civilization, and surveillance.

The rebellions of 1839–62 and the later Manyam rebellion of 1922–24 consequently need to be read not merely as episodes of resistance but also as moments in which competing understandings of Koya society confronted one another. For the colonial state, rebellion represented disorder and a challenge to governmental authority. For the communities involved, resistance was connected to questions of land, customary practice, political autonomy, and the defence of their social world.

The study of colonial Koya identity therefore requires a critical reading of the archive. Colonial anthropology and administration should not be treated as transparent windows into Adivasi society. They were themselves instruments of colonial knowledge and power. Recovering Koya history requires reading these sources against their classificatory assumptions and recognizing the political agency that colonial representations sought to diminish. Such an approach enables the history of the Koyas to move beyond the colonial categories of “primitive,” “tribal,” and “jungle” and towards an understanding of them as historical actors who actively negotiated, contested, and resisted the expanding colonial order.

Notes

1. F. R. Hemingway, *Madras District Gazetteer: Godavari* (Madras: Superintendent, Government Press, 1915), 3, 101.
2. For the discussion of shifting cultivation and colonial attitudes towards it, see David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, eds., *Nature, Culture, and Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Jacques Pouchepadass, "British Attitudes Towards Shifting Cultivation in Colonial South India: A Case Study of South Canara District, 1800–1920," in Arnold and Guha, eds., *Nature, Culture, and Imperialism*, 147–174.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Sujata Sahoo, *Land and Forest in Colonial Odisha: A Study of Shifting Cultivation among Juang Community* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Hyderabad, 2019).
5. Hemingway, *Madras District Gazetteer: Godavari*, 260.
6. Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 98–100.
7. J. Mangamma, "Land System and Muttas in the Visakhapatnam Agency," *Itihas* 7, no.2 (1979), Andhra Pradesh State Archives, Hyderabad.
8. Phillimore, *Historical Records of the Survey of India (1815 to 1830)*, Dehradun, quoted in Mangamma, "Land System and Muttas in the Visakhapatnam Agency."
9. Atlury Murali, "Alluri Sitaram Raju and Manyam Rebellion 1922–24," *Social Scientist* 12, no. 4 (1984): 4–5.
10. Hemingway, *Madras District Gazetteer: Godavari*, 94.
11. Crispin Bates and Alpa Shah, eds., *Savage Attack: Tribal Insurgency in India*; Atlury Murali, "Tribal Armed Rebellion of 1922–1924 in the Madras Presidency: A Study of Causation as Colonial Legitimation," 141.
12. Ranajit Guha, "Rebellious Hillmen: The Gudem-Rampa Risings," in *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 93.
13. Hemingway, *Madras District Gazetteer: Godavari*, 60–66.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Henry Morris, *A Descriptive and Historical Account of the Godavari District in the Presidency of Madras* (London: Trübner & Co., 1878), 88–91. See also Bhangya Bhukya, *The Roots of the Periphery: A History of the Gonds of Deccan India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017).

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