

# The Ediga Community: Understanding the Social Fabric and Cultural Practices in Karnataka

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## Abstract

Ethnographic studies have enriched our understanding of the Idiga community. The Ediga (Idiga) community is one of the prominent communities in South India and is scattered across the states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu. This review aims to explore the unique features of the Ediga community's society, way of life, culture, etymology, distribution, traditional occupations, family, social stratification, marriage practices among the community, religious beliefs and practices, life cycle rituals, gender roles, family structure, economic transformation, challenges, community governance, cultural interactions, status, educational and social advancements, dietary practices, and traditional practices, drawing insights from available literature and research. Additionally, the paper examines their unique characteristics, drawing insights from ethnographic records and supplemented by available literature.

**Keywords:** Ediga (Idiga), Billava, Toddy Tapping, Ethnographic, Social Fabric, Culture, Traditional Practices

## Introduction

The Ediga (Idiga) community is one of the prominent communities in South India, spread across various regions of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu (Sreedhar Gou and Mallikarjuna Reddy, 2020). This community is socially and economically influential within the state of Karnataka. The Ediga community boasts a rich and vibrant heritage, with deeply rooted traditions that have endured for centuries. They represent a historically significant group, with a distinctive culture, way of life, traditional practices, and societal structure (Thurston and Rangachari, 1910). Despite the challenges posed by the caste system and social stratification in the past, the Ediga and its associated sects have steadfastly maintained a strong sense of cultural identity and made invaluable contributions to the cultural fabric of the region.

Nanjundayya and Iyer's foundational work in 1928 explores the origin, migration, way of life, traditional practices, and occupations of the Ediga community and its associated groups. Thurston (1909) provides a detailed account of the Billava subgroup, offering insights into their caste identity and ritual practices. Additionally, Sirajuddin (1989) conducted anthropometric analyses, providing a scientific basis for studying the community's physical characteristics. These studies, along with other

available literature, form the foundation for examining the cultural, social, and economic aspects of the Ediga community in Karnataka (Kavulavu, 2017; Sundaramurthy, 2007).

### **Methodology and Data Collection**

The research paper employs traditional anthropological methodologies, such as holistic, ethnographic, comparative, and historical approaches, to know the various aspects of the Ediga and its associated sects in the state of Karnataka respectively. It is primarily based on the folk beliefs and cultural practices of the Ediga and its associated sects in the state of Karnataka. Further, this research paper utilized secondary data with a qualitative approach, and the required secondary is obtained from various academic databases like ShodhGanga, ResearchGate, and Google Scholar, as well as newspaper articles and other relevant publications. Data collection included quasi-participant observation methods and unstructured, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, which provided detailed insights on the Ediga and its associated sects. Also, group discussions with elder members of the community were conducted to further enrich the understanding of their society holistically. This review aims to explore the unique features of the Ediga community's society, way of life, culture, etymology, distribution, traditional occupations, family, social stratification, marriage practices among the community, religious beliefs and practices, life cycle rituals, gender roles, family structure, economic transformation, challenges, community governance, cultural interactions, status, educational and social advancements, dietary practices, and traditional practices, drawing insights from available literature and research. Additionally, the paper examines their unique characteristics, drawing insights from ethnographic records and supplemented by available literature.

### **Etymology and Distribution**

The name Ediga is etymologically tied to toddy tapping as a traditional occupation (Gupta, 2004). Derivatives such as 'Billava,' 'Pujari,' and 'Naidu' identify the community in specific regions, reflecting linguistic and cultural adaptation over time and space. Geographically, the Idiga and its associated sects are spread across districts such as Bangalore, Udupi, Chitradurga, Mysore, Mandya, Hassan, Coorg, and Dakshina Kannada, Chamarajanagar, Koppala, Shivamogga, Raichur, Ballari, and Vijayanagara in the state of Karnataka. Historically, they are considered migrants from Telugu-speaking regions, potentially linked to areas like Rajahmundry and Penukonda in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The widespread presence of the Idiga community across Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu highlights their regional significance and adaptability to diverse cultural landscapes.

### **Traditional Occupations**

Historically, the Idiga were primarily engaged in toddy-tapping, a skilful occupation involving the extraction of sap from palm trees, which is then fermented to produce toddy, a traditional alcoholic beverage. The "North Arcot Manual" (1881) documents the community's association with toddy-tapping in the Telugu-speaking regions. Additionally, the Madras Census Report of 1901 traces their ancestry to the Balija community of Rajahmundry in the Godavari district, suggesting that their occupational specialization led to their recognition as a distinct caste.

Previously, toddy tapping from palm trees was the primary occupation and economic basis of the community. This traditional livelihood, rooted in their connections to the land and natural resources, held deep significance within their cultural and social structure. Over time, however, government

restrictions and regulations on the utilisation of forest resources compelled many Ediga's to diversify their economic pursuits for survival. This led to the adoption of alternative occupations, such as agriculture, liquor vending, and excise-related trades. The transition was not without its challenges, as the community had to adapt to changing policy environments and market conditions in time and space. In contemporary circumstances, the community has established a prominent presence as liquor shop owners and excise contractors, leveraging their historical expertise and community networks to navigate these new economic realms. Nonetheless, a segment of the Ediga population continues to engage in agricultural labour, highlighting the persistence of economic diversity within the group. This multifaceted economic landscape reflects the community's resilience and ability to innovate in the face of shifting socio-economic realities while also maintaining connections to their traditional roots and livelihoods from generations together.

Likewise, the community people are also engaged in various occupations, including agriculture, farming labourers, wage labour, factory work, education, police, soldiers, security personnel, and traders. However, many members of the community have since diversified into fields such as literature, sports, entrepreneurship, theatre, film, business, and politics. Field observations reveal Ediga and related sects' housing varies based on socioeconomic status, with traditional low-status occupation being toddy tapping, influenced by various factors.

### **Family, Social Stratification, and Marriage Practices among the Community**

Most of the Idiga community people stay in a joint family system, and the community exhibits a complex social stratification, with distinct subdivisions based on traditional occupational roles. The three primary subgroups are the Mudde Idigas, Sasve Idigas, and Arya Idigas, each maintaining hierarchical distinctions that significantly influence marriage alliances within the community. Intermarriages are generally permitted between the Mudde and Sasve Idigas, who are considered more closely aligned in their social status and traditional occupations. However, the Arya Idigas, who are typically viewed as holding a higher social standing, do not engage in intermarriages with the other two subgroups. This rigid adherence to social hierarchies reflects the deep-rooted caste-based dynamics that have shaped the Idiga community's social structure over time (Kavyashri and Daivadnya, 2022).

Despite these hierarchical divisions, the community largely practices monogamous marriages as the cultural norm. Polygamy, though occasionally observed, is often driven by the societal pressure to produce offspring, particularly in cases of childlessness within a marriage. The traditional norms within the community also favour virilocal residence, where the bride moves to the groom's household after marriage. However, in more recent times, a gradual shift towards neolocal arrangements, where the newly married couple establishes an independent household, is emerging, especially among the younger generation of the Idiga community. This transition reflects the community's gradual adaptation to changing social dynamics and the increasing influence of modern values on their traditional family structures (Kavyashri and Daivadnya, 2022).

### **Religious Beliefs and Practices**

The religious practices reflect syncretism. While most worship Shiva (Ishwara) and smear sacred ash, a few community people revere Vishnu. The primary deity is goddess Yellamma and is associated with fertility and familial well-being. Ritual observances include visits to prominent shrines like Saundatti

Yellamma. Additionally, many Idiga serve as pujaris (priests) at bhuta shrines, holding reputed curative powers.

Ancestral worship and rituals honouring departed elders are also integral to their religious ethos. The community's way of life, religious beliefs, and traditional practices demonstrate their adaptability, as they have incorporated diverse regional deities and customs into their cultural fabric, showcasing their ability to syncretise various religious influences. They have continued to evolve their religious practices, incorporating new elements while maintaining their core beliefs and traditions. This adaptability has allowed the Idiga community to maintain their religious identity while adapting to changing social and cultural landscapes (Gupta, 2004).

### **Life Cycle Rituals: Rites of Passage**

The Idiga community places great importance on cultural rites of passage, which encompass the key stages of life such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death. These rituals are deeply rooted in traditional customs and reflect the community's values and social structures. At birth, the maternal uncle plays a central role by naming the child, a gesture that signifies the importance of familial roles and relationships. Early social integration is also marked through rituals such as ear and nose piercing, symbolising the child's entry into the wider social fabric.

The transition from childhood to womanhood is celebrated at puberty, especially when a girl experiences her first menstruation. This significant event is observed with her isolation in a specially constructed leaf-built shed, a period of seclusion that underscores her growing maturity. The transition is completed with a ritual bath, symbolising purification and the official marking of her womanhood. Marriage customs in the community begin with negotiations from the groom's family, initiating a process that emphasises the importance of cultural reciprocity. The exchange of symbolic items, such as areca nuts and jaggery, is an essential part of the negotiation, representing the binding ties between the two families. The traditional wedding ceremony is elaborate, culminating in the tying of the mangalsutra (thali), a significant symbol of the marital bond.

Death, too, is marked by deeply symbolic rituals. The community's burial practices are rooted in beliefs concerning purity and pollution, with certain rites performed to ensure the proper transition of the deceased's spirit. Mourning customs, such as the 10-day suthaka (known as the pollution period), serve as a period of communal solidarity, where the community comes together in grief and support for the bereaved, reinforcing the collective nature of their traditions. These rites of passage, in all their richness and complexity, highlight the Idiga community's deep adherence to their cultural heritage.

### **Gender Roles and Family Structure**

Idiga society is patriarchal, with men predominantly assuming roles as breadwinners. Women, while central to domestic responsibilities, participate in agricultural labor. Practices like bride price and dowry remain integral to marriage negotiations, reflecting traditional gendered norms in the community, like other neighbouring caste, community, and religious groups.

### **Economic Transformation and Challenges**

It is found that the economic transformations have seen the Idiga-associated communities shift from traditional toddy tapping occupations to excise-related businesses. This transition underscores resilience amidst changing policy environments with respect to time and space within the community. However,

issues like child labour and limited land ownership in rural areas pose challenges, emphasising the need for targeted interventions for the community.

### **Community Governance, Cultural Interactions, Status, Educational and Social Advancements**

Among the Ediga communities, the traditional caste councils, once central to dispute resolution, have given way to village-level councils. At the state level, the community organisations like the Arya Edigara Sangha advocate for the community's collective interests, fostering political and social cohesion. The community maintains intricate relationships with other neighbouring communities, viewing Brahmins as superior and equating themselves with groups like Vokkaliga and Devanga. They adhere to caste-based dietary restrictions, underscoring deeply ingrained cultural hierarchies. Political representation among the Idiga community reflects their growing influence in contemporary Karnataka as well as national-level politics and participation.

The Ediga and its associated communities are one of the major communities in the state of Karnataka in terms of population, political participation, power politics, and socioeconomic and educational contribution. Historically, the community has faced significant educational and social disadvantages due to socioeconomic, reservation, and community constraints. However, in recent decades, the community has witnessed remarkable progress in socioeconomic status, literacy, and educational attainment. While boys are encouraged to pursue higher studies, the traditional gender norms within the Idiga community have often led to girls discontinuing their education at the secondary level (school dropouts).

Despite this disparity, the Idiga community has made strides in diversifying their career paths, with members finding success in modern professions such as medicine, engineering, and politics. This socioeconomic mobility reflects the community's resilience and adaptability in the face of historical barriers. Their socioeconomic conditions are influenced by numerous factors, with occupation playing a significant role.

Currently, the community is engaged in various occupations like agriculture, farming labourers, wage labour, factory work, education, police, soldiers, security personnel, and traders. However, several members of the community have since diversified into fields such as literature, sports, entrepreneurship, theatre, film, business, and politics, respectively. Nonetheless, educational and professional disparities persist, particularly in rural settings, where access to resources and opportunities may be more limited. Addressing these persistent challenges requires a nuanced and holistic understanding of the Idiga sect's unique social and cultural contexts, along with targeted interventions to promote inclusive and equitable development.

### **Dietary Habits**

The community's dietary habits are influenced by their cultural and socioeconomic traditions, with staple foods including ragi roti, jowar roti, akki roti, chapati, rice, dal, eggs, chicken, mutton, maize, wheat, milk products, and fish. They prefer vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods, with occasional consumption of local arrack and tobacco being common among the people. While toddy, a fermented palm wine, holds cultural significance and is consumed during festivals and celebrations, its consumption is generally restricted to specific social contexts rather than being a regular part of their diet. This nuanced approach to food reflects the community's adaptability to changing socioeconomic realities, as well as their adherence to regional cooking variations that have developed over time. Further, the community's

dietary practices showcase their rich cultural heritage, balancing traditional staples with evolving food preferences shaped by their interactions with diverse communities and environments.

## Conclusion

Edigas have a deeply rooted historical connection to the natural environment, which transcends their primary occupation of toddy tapping. Beyond this craft, their expertise extended into specialised areas such as Soma preparation and Ayurvedic medicine, highlighting their versatility and cultural significance within traditional Indian society. These practices not only underscore their connection to ancient Indian traditions but also reflect their role as custodians of indigenous knowledge systems. Before India's independence, the Idiga were also employed as soldiers by local rulers, known as Palegars, showcasing their versatility beyond toddy-tapping. Ediga is an indigenous community that has spread into several groups with different names across the Indian state of Karnataka. As compared to other neighbouring community societies, the Ediga communities have their own unique cultural history, way of life, heritage, and artistic traditions, etymology, distribution, traditional occupations, family, social stratification, marriage practices among the community, religious beliefs and practices, life cycle rituals, gender roles, family structure, economic transformation, challenges, community governance, cultural interactions, status, educational and social advancements, dietary practices, and traditional practices that have developed over time.

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