

Caste, Community, and Corvée: Social Hierarchies and Labor Relations in Medieval Telangana's Agrarian Society

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Abstract:

This paper examines the interlocking structures of caste identity, community organization, and compulsory labor obligations (corvée/vetti) that defined agrarian society in medieval Telangana, approximately from the tenth to the sixteenth century CE. Drawing on epigraphic evidence, copper plate land grants, temple records, and the growing body of Telugu historiography, the study demonstrates that caste hierarchies in the Deccan were not merely ceremonial or ritual constructs but were systematically embedded in economic production, taxation regimes, and labor extraction. The Kakatiya dynasty (c. 1083–1323 CE) institutionalized a layered system of agrarian governance in which dominant peasant castes (Kamma, Reddy, Velama) functioned as intermediaries between the state and cultivating communities, while artisan and service castes were bound to hereditary occupational obligations enforceable through ritual sanction and state coercion. Untouchable communities (Mala, Madiga) occupied the base of this hierarchy, performing corvée labor without compensation or legal recourse. The paper traces these structures through post-Kakatiya successor states—the Musunuri Nayakas, Rachakonda and Devarakonda kingdoms, and the early Vijayanagara provincial administration—showing how labor relations adapted to political transitions while retaining their caste-determined character. Four original data tables synthesize inscriptional and secondary evidence to illuminate taxation categories, corvée obligations, caste-occupational profiles, and the epigraphic record base. The study contributes to broader debates in South Asian agrarian history on the relationship between ritual hierarchy, fiscal organization, and social reproduction.

Keywords: medieval Telangana, Kakatiya dynasty, vetti/corvée, caste and labor, agrarian history, Deccan epigraphy, social hierarchy.

1. Introduction

The agrarian landscape of medieval Telangana was shaped not merely by ecological endowment or dynastic fortune but by an intricate social architecture in which caste, occupational identity, and labor obligation were mutually constitutive. Between the consolidation of Kakatiya power in the mid-eleventh century and the eventual absorption of the region into the Vijayanagara empire by the mid-fourteenth century, the Telugu-speaking Deccan witnessed the crystallization of social hierarchies that would prove remarkably durable across political transitions. To understand agriculture, commerce, and artisanal production in this period is, therefore, to understand caste as an economic institution.

Historians of medieval South India have long recognized the importance of brahmadeya grants, devadana endowments, and the proliferation of agrarian inscriptions as windows into village-level social organization (Stein, 1980; Kulke, 1993). Yet Telangana, specifically—geographically distinct from the Tamil plains and less studied than the Karnataka-dominated Deccan—has received comparatively limited attention in anglophone economic history. Works by Parabrahma Sastry (1978), Chattopadhyaya (1994), and, more recently, Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman (2012) have opened productive lines of inquiry, but the specific articulation of caste hierarchy with corvée labor and agrarian taxation remains underexplored.

This paper attempts to fill that gap. It argues that corvée labor—designated in Telugu and Sanskrit sources variously as vetti, vishti, or ullam—was not an incidental imposition on the agrarian poor but a foundational element of surplus extraction in medieval Telangana, structurally linked to caste status and reinforced by both ritual authority and state power. The paper proceeds through five main sections: a historiographical overview, an analysis of caste-occupational structures, a detailed examination of agrarian taxation, a treatment of corvée as a labor regime, and a concluding discussion of continuity and change across the Kakatiya and post-Kakatiya periods.

2. Historiographical Context and Source Base

The historiography of medieval Telangana must begin with its epigraphic richness. The Andhra Pradesh State Epigraphical Department has catalogued over 5,000 stone and copper-plate inscriptions from the medieval period, a substantial proportion dating to the Kakatiya era (Parabrahma Sastry, 1978). These inscriptions range from royal prasastis to village-level gift records and judicial settlements, collectively forming the most reliable evidence base for reconstructing agrarian and social history in the absence of continuous literary sources.

Burton Stein's (1980) model of the 'segmentary state,' developed for Tamil Nadu, has been applied—with modifications—to the Telugu-speaking Deccan by scholars such as Cynthia Talbot (2001), whose meticulous study of Kakatiya society remains the most comprehensive treatment of the dynasty's social formations. Talbot demonstrates that the Kakatiyas operated through an elaborate system of nayaka intermediaries who held land rights and labor obligations in exchange for military and revenue services—a system that simultaneously reinforced caste boundaries and created space for mobile, entrepreneurial communities to ascend social hierarchies through service and patronage.

Indian Marxist historiography, particularly as articulated by R. S. Sharma (1965) and D. N. Jha (1974), emphasizes the structural role of forced labor in defining feudal relations in medieval India. While their model has been critiqued for imposing Eurocentric categories, the basic insight—that labor extraction was coercive, caste-determined, and systematically embedded in agrarian production—finds substantial support in Telangana's inscriptional record. The concept of vetti/vishti appears repeatedly in grant records, sometimes as a tax category commuted to cash, sometimes as an obligation that recipients of land grants were expressly freed from imposing on their newly granted villages—suggesting that corvée was a default condition of agrarian life.

More recent scholarship by Prasad (2007) and Murthy (2012) has foregrounded the experience of lower-caste and untouchable communities in Telangana's medieval inscriptional record, moving beyond the elite-centric narrative of nayaka service and royal patronage to examine how caste hierarchy was reproduced at the village level through ritual, economic compulsion, and spatial segregation. This paper draws on all these traditions while contributing new synthetic tables from primary epigraphic sources.

Table 1- Caste Groups and Occupational Roles in Medieval Telangana (c. 10th–16th Century CE)

Caste/Community	Primary Occupation	Varna Classification	Evidence Source
Velama	Landlord, Military service	Kshatriya (regional)	Kakatiya inscriptions (12th–14th c.)
Kamma	Peasant cultivator, Nayaka service	Shudra (agrarian elite)	Reddy-Kamma settlement records
Reddy	Revenue farmer, Village headman	Shudra (agrarian elite)	Warangal Kakatiya grants
Teli (Oilpresser)	Oil extraction, trade	Vaishya/Shudra	Chalukyan–Kakatiya copper plates
Kummari (Potter)	Pottery, ritual vessels	Shudra artisan	Epigraphy, Kakatiyas
Chakali (Washerman)	Laundry, corvée labor	Shudra artisan	Medieval Telugu norms, Puranas
Mala / Madiga	Weaving, leather, and field labor	Panchama (Untouchable)	Andhra itihasa sources, oral tradition

Note. Data synthesized from Talbot (2001), Parabrahma Sastry (1978), and Andhra Pradesh Epigraphical Department records. Varna classifications reflect regional usage, not orthodox Brahmanical categories. ARE = Annual Report on Epigraphy.

3. Caste, Community, and Agrarian Organization

3.1 Dominant Agrarian Castes

The agrarian economy of medieval Telangana was dominated by a tripartite elite of Velama, Kamma, and Reddy communities, each occupying distinct but overlapping niches within the agrarian hierarchy. The Velamas, who traced military and administrative lineages to Kakatiya service, functioned primarily as landlords and military retainers, controlling large tracts of dryland and wetland agriculture in what are today Warangal, Karimnagar, and Nalgonda districts (Talbot, 2001, pp. 112–138). Kakatiya copper plates from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries document Velama chiefs (nayakas) receiving village grants that carried with them the right to collect specified revenue fractions and to demand particular services from subordinate cultivating and artisan communities.

The Reddy and Kamma communities, while both classified broadly as peasant cultivators of Shudra status, occupied different positions within the agrarian structure. Reddys tended to function as desais or village headmen, collecting revenue on behalf of the state while retaining a portion as their own income—a role Stein (1980) would recognize as characteristic of the 'little king' in a segmentary system. Kamma communities, more mobile and commercially oriented, frequently appear in inscriptions as donors to temples and as participants in long-distance trade networks linking Telangana's agricultural surplus to coastal ports (Chattopadhyaya, 1994, pp. 89–103).

The internal organization of these dominant communities was governed by *kula* (lineage) and *gotra* (exogamous clan) norms, as well as by territorial *nad* or *sima* assemblies that handled disputes over land and water. These assemblies, documented in several Kakatiya inscriptions from the Nalgonda and

Khammam regions, were exclusively composed of propertied caste men and exercised coercive authority over subordinate communities (Parabrahma Sastry, 1978, pp. 45–62).

3.2 Artisan and Service Castes

Below the agrarian elite, a stratum of occupationally specialized castes served both the rural economy and the ritual requirements of temple-centered society. The Viswabrahmin (carpenter and blacksmith castes), Kummari (potters), Kamsali (goldsmiths), and Teli (oilpressers) each occupied designated social and spatial positions within the village. Their labor was not simply market labor but was conceived as a hereditary obligation, encoded in caste custom (*achara*) and enforced through social sanctions, including ritual exclusion and collective punishment by dominant caste assemblies.

Inscriptional evidence reveals that many temple complexes in medieval Telangana maintained their own attached artisan communities, who provided specific goods and services as part of their devotional-economic obligation. The Pillalamarri grant from Nalgonda district (c. 1290 CE) records the assignment of oilpressers (Teli) to supply lamp oil to a Shiva temple, a duty described not as a hired service but as a caste obligation—the community's participation in cosmic order (Andhra Pradesh Oriental Manuscript Library records; cited in Murthy, 2012, p. 78). Similar arrangements for washermen (Chakali) serving the military and administrative households of nayaka chiefs are documented in Rachakonda-period records from the fourteenth century (Sherwani, 1969, pp. 134–135).

The rights-and-duties nexus for artisan castes operated through what scholars of medieval India have termed the 'jajmani system'—a set of reciprocal obligations between landholding patrons and serving castes that guaranteed artisans a share in the harvest in exchange for year-round service provision (Beidelman, 1959; Raheja, 1988). However, as Prasad (2007) has argued for Telangana specifically, the reciprocity of this system was heavily asymmetrical: artisans could not easily exit the relationship, were subject to collective punishment for individual defection, and received shares calibrated to their caste rank rather than their labor input.

3.3 Untouchable Communities and the Base of the Hierarchy

At the base of Telangana's medieval caste hierarchy were the communities classified in later sources as Panchama—primarily the Mala (weavers) and Madiga (leather workers and cobblers) communities, who constituted a significant proportion of the agrarian labor force in most villages. Their legal and ritual exclusion from the village proper, their confinement to segregated settlements on village peripheries, and their liability for the most physically demanding and ritually polluting forms of *corvée* are documented across multiple epigraphic and literary sources.

Mala communities provided the bulk of agricultural day labor during peak seasons—plowing, transplanting, and harvesting—without the security of hereditary tenancy. Madiga communities were responsible for the supply of leather goods essential to agriculture (shoes, harnesses, drum skins for temple use) and were simultaneously required to perform duties associated with death—the removal of dead cattle and, in some documented cases, of human corpses from the village (Prasad, 2007, pp. 203–219). These death-related *corvée* duties were among the most stigmatizing and were used as ritual evidence of Panchama communities' inherent impurity, creating a self-reinforcing loop between economic exploitation and social stigma.

The Telugu literary tradition offers some glimpses into this world. The thirteenth-century poet Palkuriki Somanatha, a devotee of the Virashaiva tradition, wrote sympathetically of artisan and lower-caste

communities—but even his accounts reveal the depth of occupational caste constraint. His Basava Purana (c. 1250 CE) records instances where devotees from untouchable backgrounds sought liberation through Shaiva bhakti, implicitly acknowledging the otherwise inescapable nature of caste-determined labor (Narayana Rao & Shulman, 2012, pp. 67–89).

Table 2-Principal Agrarian Tax Categories in Medieval Telangana (c. 10th–16th Century CE)

Tax/Levy Name	Telugu/Sanskrit Term	Basis of Assessment	Rate/Quantum	Period/Dynasty
Land revenue	Bhumi-kara	Crop yield (1/6th rule)	~16–25% of produce	Kakatiya, 12th–14th c.
Irrigation tax	Neerodu/Kattu	Tank/canal usage	Variable by crop type	Kakatiya-Musunuri era
Cattle tax	Gavundi	Per head of cattle	1–2 gadyanas/head	Kakatiya records
Market toll	Shandakara / Pattana-shulka	Merchant turnover	2–5% ad valorem	Chalukyan–Kakatiya
Artisan levy	Silpi-kara	Household-based	Fixed quota/month	Reddy–Velama records
Corvée labor duty	Vishti / Vetti	Compulsory, caste-assigned	Unpaid, obligatory	Pan-Deccan, all periods
Pilgrimage tax	Tirtha-kara	Per pilgrim arrival	Nominal coin levy	Kakatiya, Warangal

Note. Tax nomenclature and rates were synthesized from Parabrahma Sastry (1978), Talbot (2001), and Annual Report on Epigraphy (ARE) records. Gadyana = gold coin unit. Rate figures are approximate and vary by region and period. Vishti/vetti is included as a labor levy equivalent.

4. Agrarian Taxation and Revenue Systems

4.1 The Fiscal Architecture of the Kakatiya State

The Kakatiya state developed a sophisticated fiscal architecture that drew on both Brahmanical normative texts and practical agrarian administration. The foundational principle—that the king was entitled to one-sixth of agricultural produce (shadbhaga)—is cited in several Kakatiya inscriptions as the theoretical basis of land revenue, though actual assessment appears to have ranged between sixteen and twenty-five percent of gross produce depending on crop type, irrigation access, and the negotiated position of the revenue farmer (Talbot, 2001, pp. 157–178).

Land was classified into multiple productivity tiers based on soil quality and water availability. Wetland paddy cultivation under tank irrigation (eri-land) attracted higher assessments than dryland millets, while temple lands (devadana) and Brahmin endowments (brahmadeya) were frequently exempted from standard revenue obligations—though not always from corvée. This tiered system is documented with particular clarity in the Manthana copper plates (1218 CE) from the Khammam region, which enumerate

land categories, their respective tax rates, and the specific corvée duties attached to non-exempt holdings (Andhra Pradesh Government Epigraphical Department records; cited in Parabrahma Sastry, 1978, pp. 198–215).

Irrigation taxation (neerodu or kattu) reflected the centrality of tank-based agriculture to Telangana's agrarian economy. The Kakatiyas were prolific builders of irrigation tanks—the Ramappa tank (c. 1213 CE) and the Pakhal lake system being among the most celebrated—and the administration of water rights was inseparable from caste hierarchies: dominant castes controlled the sluice gates and determined water allocation to lower-caste cultivators (Reddy, 1990, pp. 112–131). Tank bund maintenance itself was organized as a form of corvée, with lower-caste and untouchable communities providing the physical labor of desiltation and repair without compensation.

4.2 Market Regulation and Artisan Levies

Beyond agrarian revenue, the Kakatiya state extracted surplus from commercial exchange through market tolls (shandakara, pattana-shulka) levied at periodic markets and urban centers. Warangal, the Kakatiya capital, was a significant commercial center; the Tripurantakam inscription (1173 CE) from the Nandyal region enumerates toll categories covering textiles, livestock, salt, oil, and crafted goods, reflecting both the diversity of commodity exchange and the granularity of fiscal surveillance (South Indian Inscriptions, Vol. X; cited in Chattopadhyaya, 1994, p. 178).

Artisan castes were subject to a distinct levy—silpi-kara—assessed on a household basis rather than on individual transactions. This household-based assessment gave fiscal officers leverage over the entire caste community, since non-payment by individual households could trigger collective sanctions. The silpi-kara records in several Kakatiya inscriptions specify the commodities that artisan households were required to deliver to the treasury or to designated temple authorities: so many yards of cloth per weaver household per season, so many pots per potter household per quarter, so many iron implements per blacksmith household per year (Parabrahma Sastry, 1978, pp. 221–244).

This system blurred the boundary between taxation and corvée: the artisan was simultaneously paying a tax (in kind) and performing a labor obligation (hereditary occupational service). The conceptual conflation was not accidental—it reinforced the ideological claim that artisan communities served the cosmic order through their work, transforming what was in practice a fiscal extraction mechanism into a naturalized religious duty (Raheja, 1988, pp. 45–67).

Table 3- Corvée (Vetti) Labor Obligations by Caste Community in Medieval Telangana

Caste Group	Corvée Form (Vetti)	Labor Site	Exemption Possibility	Regulatory Authority
Untouchable castes (Mala/Madiga)	Field labor, road building, and body disposal	Royal/temple/landlord estates	None	Village headman (desai)
Artisan castes (Kummari, Kammari)	Craft production for temples/royalty	Workshop attached to the temple	Merit-based partial exemption	Nayaka, temple trustees

Chakali (Washerman)	Laundry for courts and soldiers	Palace/military camp	None	Nayaka/military commander
Teli (Oilpresser)	Oil for lamps, ritual supply	Temple precincts	If the patron donated a lamp gift	Temple management committee
Peasant cultivators (Kamma/Reddy)	Irrigation maintenance, granary labor	Tank bunds, storage sites	Tax-equivalent substitution	Revenue officer (Karanam)
Tribal communities (Koyas, Chenchus)	Forest tribute, hunting corvée	Forested frontier zones	None	Nayaka frontier commander

Note. Data compiled from Parabrahma Sastry (1978), Sherwani (1969), Prasad (2007), and Andhra Pradesh Epigraphical Department sources. Desai = village headman; Nayaka = military/administrative intermediary; Karanam = village accountant/revenue officer.

5. Corvée Labor (Vetti/Vishti) as a Regime of Social Control

5.1 The Institutional Logic of Vetti

Corvée labor—designated as vetti in Telugu and vishti in Sanskrit administrative discourse—was among the most pervasive mechanisms of surplus extraction in medieval Telangana. Unlike land revenue, which transferred a share of agricultural produce, corvée extracted labor power directly, demanding that specified categories of workers render unpaid service to the state, temple, or dominant-caste household. The institution was neither marginal nor exceptional: it was the default condition of labor relations for the lower two-thirds of the caste hierarchy.

The normative justification for vetti drew on both Brahmanical legal texts (Manu Smriti, Arthashastra) and local Telugu custom. Manu's dictum that the Shudra's essential duty was service to the twice-born provided ideological cover for labor extraction from artisan castes, while the Panchama communities' exclusion from the varna schema placed them outside even this limited framework of reciprocal obligation—reducing their labor to an unconditional imposition (Sharma, 1965, pp. 89–107). Regional custom (achara or desachara) supplemented Brahmanical norms with locally specific rules about which caste owed which service to whom, creating a dense web of obligation that varied from village to village but was everywhere caste-determined.

The Kakatiya state actively regulated corvée through its administrative apparatus. The position of desai (village headman) was typically held by a dominant-caste man—usually Reddy or Velama—who had authority to summon lower-caste labor for specific tasks: building or repairing tank bunds, transporting grain to state granaries, constructing or maintaining roads and temples. The karanam (village accountant), a position frequently held by literate Niyogi Brahmin communities, maintained records of corvée obligations and compliance, creating an administrative infrastructure for labor control (Talbot, 2001, pp. 178–201).

5.2 Vetti and Untouchable Communities

The corvée obligations of Mala and Madiga communities were distinguished from those of artisan castes by their unlimited character and their connection to ritually polluting work. While artisan castes might perform a fixed quantum of hereditary service and then pursue market exchange for the remainder of their working time, untouchable laborers could be summoned at any time for any task that dominant castes deemed beneath themselves. This structural availability—what Prasad (2007) calls 'permanent corvée availability'—was the material foundation of untouchability as an economic institution.

Among the most significant corvée obligations borne by untouchable communities was the maintenance of village tank bunds. In Telangana's tank-irrigation ecology, this was not a minor ancillary task but a matter of agrarian survival: tanks that were not periodically desilted and their bunds repaired would fail, destroying the irrigation capacity on which wetland rice cultivation depended. The labor of untouchable communities in maintaining this infrastructure—estimated by Reddy (1990) to have amounted to several weeks of labor per adult household per year—was extracted without compensation and without recognition in the agrarian surplus accounts that dominant castes maintained.

The Pillalamarri grant (c. 1290 CE) provides one of the most explicit documentary records of these obligations in Telangana's medieval inscriptional corpus. It specifies that Mala and Madiga households in the granted village owe not merely agricultural labor to the new grantee but also a set of specific ritual services—including providing leather-drumming at village festivals, sweeping temple precincts, and maintaining boundary markers—that encode their subordination in the very ceremonial life of the community (Andhra Pradesh Oriental Manuscript Library; cited in Murthy, 2012, pp. 89–104). The inscription's explicit listing of these duties suggests they were considered sufficiently significant to require documentary confirmation—an indication that lower-caste communities were not passive recipients of these impositions but had been known to contest or evade them.

5.3 Post-Kakatiya Continuity and Adaptation

The collapse of Kakatiya power in 1323 CE following Malik Kafur's and subsequently Ulugh Khan's invasions did not disrupt the caste-corvée nexus; rather, the post-Kakatiya successor states—the Musunuri Nayakas (c. 1333–1368), the Rachakonda and Devarakonda Velama kingdoms (c. 1325–1475), and the eventual Vijayanagara provincial administration—all inherited and adapted the agrarian infrastructure of labor control established under the Kakatias.

The Rachakonda nayaka record (c. 1370 CE) from Nalgonda documents the confirmation of earlier Kakatiya-era caste obligations, including vetti duties, in the successor political framework—suggesting that these were considered durable social facts rather than dynasty-specific impositions (Sherwani, 1969, pp. 134–145). The Vijayanagara administration, when it extended into Telangana in the fifteenth century, similarly relied on locally established caste hierarchies as the infrastructure of revenue collection and labor mobilization, introducing the amara-nayankara system (military land assignment) as a political overlay on an existing agrarian order rather than a replacement of it (Stein, 1989, pp. 65–90).

One significant modification in the post-Kakatiya period was the partial monetization of corvée obligations. Several Reddy-kingdom inscriptions from the Kondaveedu region (c. 1400–1420 CE) record instances in which the commutation of vetti to cash payment is specified as an option available to artisan (but not untouchable) households, suggesting the growing penetration of money into agrarian relations and the emergence of a nascent labor market for skilled craft production (Annual Report on Epigraphy, 1915; cited in Chattopadhyaya, 1994, p. 213). However, this monetization was uneven and did not reach

the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy: untouchable communities continued to owe unconditional labor through the end of the medieval period and well into the early modern era.

Table 4- Key Inscriptional and Documentary Sources for Caste and Labor in Medieval Telangana

Inscription/Record	Location	Date (CE)	Issuing Authority	Content Relevant to Paper	Repository
Hanumakonda pillar inscription	Warangal district	1163	Prola I (Kakatiya)	Land grants, brahmadeya, vetti obligations	Epigraphy Indica, Vol. VI
Manthena copper plates	Khammam region	1218	Ganapati (Kakatiya)	Artisan caste duties, tax remissions	AP Govt. Epigraphic Dept.
Tripurantakam inscription	Nandyal region	1173	Rudra (Kakatiya)	Market dues, toll levies, merchant guilds	South Indian Inscriptions, Vol. X
Pillalamarri grant	Nalgonda district	c. 1290	Prataparudra I	Untouchable labor duties, village hierarchy	Andhra Pradesh Oriental MS Library
Rachakonda Nayaka record	Nalgonda	c. 1370	Anapota Nayaka	Post-Kakatiya caste reorganization	Sherwani (1969)
Kondaveedu temple grant	Guntur region	c. 1420	Reddy kings	Temple service castes, devadana	ARE Reports, 1915

Note. ARE = Annual Report on Epigraphy (Archaeological Survey of India). Epigraphy Indica = Government of India Epigraphy publication. South Indian Inscriptions (SII) = Archaeological Survey of India series. Sources: Parabrahma Sastry (1978); Talbot (2001); Sherwani (1969); Murthy (2012); AP Oriental Manuscript Library, Hyderabad.

6. Gender, Caste, and Agrarian Labor

Any analysis of caste and corvée in medieval Telangana must account for the gendered dimensions of labor extraction, even where direct documentation is sparse. Women within each caste were typically assigned to gender-specific productive tasks—transplanting rice, winnowing, weaving, grinding grain—that were also subject to corvée obligations. Inscriptional evidence rarely specifies gender in corvée clauses, but anthropological and comparative evidence suggest that women in lower-caste households bore

a disproportionate share of both domestic reproduction and external labor obligations (Chakravarti, 2003, pp. 78–101).

Devadasi (temple servant) arrangements institutionalized a specific form of gendered labor extraction at the intersection of caste, sexuality, and ritual economy. In several Kakatiya-period temple grant inscriptions, devadasi communities are recorded as attached to specific temples, their service described in terms that conflate ritual duty with sexual availability to the temple's patron community. The Tripurantakam and Pillalamarri grants both reference temple service women whose obligations are listed alongside those of male artisans—suggesting that gendered labor was as systematically organized as occupational caste labor (Parabrahma Sastry, 1978, pp. 312–329).

For Mala and Madiga women, the intersection of caste subordination and gender produced a condition of multiple vulnerability: subject to sexual exploitation by dominant-caste men as well as to unlimited *corvée* demands, they occupied a position at the base of both the caste hierarchy and the gender order. The reformist literature of the Virashaiva movement—which gained traction in Telangana in the thirteenth century—addressed this double subordination in some of its hagiographic accounts, though the movement ultimately failed to transform the structural conditions that produced it (Narayana Rao & Shulman, 2012, pp. 89–110).

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that caste, community, and *corvée* were not separate domains of medieval Telangana's social history but were constitutively intertwined elements of a single agrarian regime. Caste hierarchy determined access to land and water, calibrated the quantum and character of labor obligations, and structured the ritual framework through which economic exploitation was naturalized. The Kakatiya state was not the creator of this system, but it was its most consequential institutionalizer in the Telugu-speaking Deccan: through its epigraphically documented apparatus of *nayaka* intermediaries, village headmen, and accountants, the Kakatiyas systematized *corvée* extraction, hierarchized caste obligations, and embedded both in the fiscal architecture of the state.

The post-Kakatiya successor states inherited these structures largely intact. Political transitions altered the names of the powerful and the territorial boundaries of administrative units, but the underlying grammar of caste-determined labor relations persisted. Partial monetization in the Reddy-kingdom period represented an adaptive response to the growing commercialization of the economy, but it remained caste-selective, extending commutation rights to artisan communities while leaving untouchable *corvée* obligations untouched.

The broader implications of this study reach beyond medieval Telangana. The caste-*corvée* nexus documented here offers a historically grounded counterpoint to idealist accounts of the *jajmani* system as a harmonious exchange of services: in practice, the system was coercive, asymmetrical, and reproduced social inequality across generations. It also complicates linear narratives of agrarian 'development' that read commercialization as straightforwardly liberating: the monetization of some *corvée* obligations occurred within a framework of caste constraint that left the most vulnerable communities' labor as unconditionally available as it had ever been.

Future research should pursue several directions: the digital cataloguing and systematic analysis of Andhra Pradesh's medieval epigraphic corpus for labor-related terminology; comparative studies with Karnataka and Tamil Nadu's medieval records to assess regional variation in *corvée* regimes; and engagement with oral historical and community memory sources that may preserve lower-caste perspectives absent from

the elite-produced inscriptional record. The history of labor in medieval Telangana is, ultimately, a history of whose labor made the tanks, the temples, and the agrarian surplus that inscriptions celebrate—and whose hands remain invisible in the records that celebrated it.

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