

Study of Helavi Community and Their Lifestyle

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Abstract

This study is about the *Helavi* community of Maharashtra. It covers their lifestyle, work and the problems they face, and also the expectations of the *Helavis* from the government and the difficulties they face in their lives are also mentioned.

The *Helavi* community, originally from Karnataka, is a little-known, historically significant group in southern Maharashtra, whose traditional occupations and lifestyles constitute a distinct cultural and social identity.

The study explores their historical background, professional practices, and socio-economic conditions. The *Helavi* community has undergone significant transformations due to modernisation and urbanisation. Despite their contribution to Maharashtra's caste culture, they still face many challenges, including economic instability, limited educational opportunities, and social marginalisation. The impact of changing livelihoods on their traditional ways, along with community-friendly policies, in contemporary society is analysed. This research aims to bring attention to their socio-economic needs and suggest policy measures for their upliftment by highlighting the *Helavi* community's struggles and resilience. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of cised communities in Maharashtra and the need for sustainable development policies tailored to their unique cultural and economic contexts.

The study is about the Helavi community's culture, lifestyle and the problems faced by them, calling for inclusive policies that support their education, livelihoods, and heritage preservation to ensure their dignified integration into mainstream society.

There is a combination of qualitative approaches that were used for this study—direct interaction with *Helavi* community members as an interview along with analysis of published materials, video and interviews. It helps to understand their cultural practices, socio-economic challenges, and aspirations.

Keywords: Helavi Community, Pedigree writing (Vanshaval), Genealogy, Communication, Indian Backward Community, Social Development, Preservation.

INTRODUCTION

In Maharashtra a number of indigenous and traditional communities live, each contributing uniquely to the state's cultural and socio-economic landscape. The *Helavi* community is one of them that holds a distinct place, with its deep-rooted traditions, unique occupational practices, and long-lasting societal roles and connections. Maintaining genealogical records, oral knowledge systems of conversation and their characterised lifestyle shows a heritage which is not widely documented but is of great cultural significance.

Over the years, the traditional occupations of the *Helavi* community have faced decline due to modernisation, shifting economic structures, changing generations and urbanisation. These factors had a direct impact on their livelihood. There was a time when people gave respect to this community—travelling from village to village to record lineage and communicate family histories. Now the situation is that they are less recognised and causing social and economic challenges. Hence the aim for this study is to explore the historical background, lifestyle, and professional engagements of the *Helavi* community while addressing the socio-economic challenges they face in contemporary times. It is important to understand their life experiences to see how modern changes impact their traditional practices. The study also attempts to understand how government policies, changing social life, and reduced public participation affect their place in society.

So that their struggles, way of life, the efforts they make to preserve their customs, and the impact of government policies are understood, this research seeks to highlight possible solutions to improve their standard of living and ensure their cultural preservation and more inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches. It also suggests some measures that will help improve their quality of life and prevent the destruction of their cultural heritage in this modernisation process.

METHODOLOGY

1. Field Visit

A field survey was done to observe and study the work activities of genealogy telling and writing in the Sangali district of Maharashtra state. The *Helavi* community people spread across different taluka places that were considered for field study; some 2-3 talukas from Solapur District are also included. The entire study was emphasised on genealogy telling and writing, especially their problem. *Helavi* families from the Sangali district participated and are working in the Karnataka state also.

2. Complete study of the *Helavi* community and their work.

3. Identification of various problems and challenges faced by the community on different levels.

The questions were asked regarding their traditional work, income sources, access to education and healthcare facilities, and social inclusion.

Published materials from credible sources were reviewed to understand existing research affecting the *Helavi* community.

Videos of interviews featuring *Helavi* individuals were studied to gather perspectives from a wider section of the community. These helped in cross-verifying the information obtained through direct interactions.

4. Proposed solutions for the problems faced by *Helavi* and the conservation of the genealogy-telling tradition.

In this stage, by combining field research with secondary sources, a comprehensive understanding of the *Helavi* community's way of life, the challenges they encounter, and their aspirations for a better future was presented, along with the solutions for the betterment of their lives and to preserve their genealogy-telling tradition.

RESULTS

History:

This community originated from Belgaum (Karnataka). They used to live in villages and towns like *Jodkurli*, *Nandikurli*, *Pattanakadoli*, *Chinchanimayakka*, *Bhirdi*, *Shedbal*, *Satti*, *Gundkebeta*, *Hukkeri*, etc., in the talukas of *Chikkodi*, *Nipani*, *Sankeshwar*, *Raibag*, *Athani*, and *Gokak* in Karnataka.

According to these people, this work was given to them by Lord Shiva himself. A lame man prayed to Lord Shiva and asked, "How can I earn my living?" Then Lord Shiva gave him his *Nandi* and told him to go from village to village and write down the genealogies of the people and earn his living. Legend has it that since then, these people have been working on writing genealogies. In Kannada, a disabled person is called *Helu*, hence the name *Helavi*.

Attire:

The *Nandi* bull of the *Helavi* is a big animal. The point of everyone's attraction. The attire of the *Helavi* is also eye-catching. A red or pink *dbangari feta* on the head, a *mandcholana* and *dboti* on the body, a pink uparana to cover the shoulders and legs, silver bracelets on the hands, *kundale* in the ears, and anklets and silver *todas* on the feet.

On the *Nandibaila's* back, a colourfully embroidered swing; its horns are colourfully decorated with brass caps at their ends, and it has colourful beads. A large bell and a garland of small bells are around its neck.

Since the original male of the *Helavi* community was lame, he used to walk on a *Nandibaila*. While sitting to tell the lineage, they put their thighs together and cover their feet with pink clothes.

Cast:

Since the community belongs to the *Lingayat* sect, their religious practices, customs, and traditions align with those of the *Lingayat* community. Within the community, five clans are considered significant: *Muttavar*, *Halanavar*, *Tankaravar*, *Iralavar*, and *Channabachavar*.

The community has grown and spread within these five clans.

The deities of the community include

Chinchani Mayakka, *Udgatti Uddhava*, *Kalloli Hanumanta*.

Sapadal Swami is regarded as the spiritual guru of the community. He visits the home of every community member once a year.

The *Helavi* community falls under the NT castes (*Bhatakya Vimukta Jati*) in Maharashtra, but in Karnataka it falls under the Other Backward Classes.

They use the surname '*Helavi*' only.

Work:

According to them, they have genealogical records of all *Athara Pagad Jati* and *Bara Balutedar*, along with the royal family. Just as birth and death records are kept in the record room of the government's *tehsil* office, similar or even more up-to-date records are kept with the *Helavi* community. According to these people, 'Records in government offices can get lost or have errors or can be changed by paying money. But our records remain the same as long as there is a moon and a sun in the sky.' The *Helavi* community has clan records dating back to 1061 (approximately *Shake* 982).

The *Helavi* community has records of seventeen to eighteen generations of the *Nandikar Sansthan*, *Nipanikar Sansthan*, *Kolhapur Sansthan*, *Satara Sansthan*, *Yedurkar Sansthan*, *Chinchanikar Sansthan*, *Bekirikar Sansthan*, *Marabakar Sansthan*, etc. Representatives of the community mainly travel to districts and states like Belgaum, Kolhapur, Satara, Sangli, Ratnagiri, Sindhudurg, and Goa to tell family stories and collect new records.

They go to their homes on *Nagpanchami* in *Shravan* and leave home after Diwali for this work. In the past, they would come after the harvest. Only men do this work; women do not. They stay at the place of stay and take care of the children and the household. According to them, going door to door to tell family history is hard work, so women don't do it. If a *Helavi* only has daughters or has no heir to do this work, they get their son-in-law to do it or let their brother do it.

One *Helavi* man has about ten to fifteen villages under him to get recorded.

Helavi can write and speak Kannada, Marathi and *Modi*. The genealogical records are in this *Modi* script. Earlier, the genealogical records were written on copper plates (*Tamrapata*), but as the records increased, the burden of this became greater. Therefore, later, the copperplate was discontinued, and entries were made on paper in envelopes. When the paper in their notebooks, which were sewn in a special way, became worn out, all the entries were made again in a new notebook.

The records of all the *Helavi* of South Maharashtra, including old copper plates, are kept together at the Athani Register Office (Belgaon *Helavi* Registration). The records are kept with the *Helavi* in the same manner as the records are kept in the government offices.

They would go to the same village every 2-3 years and record new births, deaths, marriages, etc. The dates written in the notebook are according to the *Shaka* chronology. 'Our genealogy also has records of how a person died in the past. There are records of who died of diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, tuberculosis, rabies, and leprosy. There are also records of some people being murdered. It is known whether this murder was committed over a farming dispute or for some other reason. However, we never say this. We take care that no new controversy arises based on our registration.' *Appa Helavi* would say this.

When a *Helavi* tells lineage about a particular family, he tells who the original male of this family was and what his original village is. He tells us about his ancestral deity, clan, land, and wealth. He tells us why and when the original male migrated and how he came to the present village.

In the past, women's names were not included. But after the Equal Property Rights Act of 1956, women's names are included. If a woman is an heir in the old genealogy list, her name is included.

The village has a designated place for the *Helavi* to stay. They go to every *Wada* and area and read their genealogy from the books in front of the people of each household in their special voice. The rhythmic voice is as fast as the voice of Brahmins performing puja. Therefore, it is not possible to understand the speech unless one listens carefully.

In exchange for their records, the people of the village would give them grain, goats, sheep, chickens, clothes, or even a pound of gold as gifts. Now, people pay money, and there is a limit to it. As a result, the *Helavi* community, which has kept records of clans for generations, has been neglected.

Uddappa Mahadev Helavi says that the old days were good. People used to donate in large quantities. Now things have changed. Where there are big families, there is hospitality. But elsewhere, there is scorn. There is no house in the village, no agriculture, and no education due to constant wandering. After leaving home during Diwali, one has to wander around until

the monsoon season. Since one has to take the young children with them, they are deprived of education. In July, one returns to the village. After staying for four months, one goes out again to wander.

Flaws:

There are many flaws in the work of the *Helavi* and the government work related to it. In western Maharashtra, Marathas used to rely on the genealogical records of the *Helavis* to obtain proof of their membership in the Kunbi community or for other purposes. Later, the Maharashtra government refused to accept these records for caste certificates.

In the changing times, it is said that the number of people in the *Helavi* community who tell the genealogies has now reduced to a handful. The new generation is not inclined towards the traditional work of wandering and telling genealogies. Therefore, the number of these *Helavi* people is also seen decreasing.

The documents they have are their biggest capital. In the meantime, all the documents in the house of a *Helavi* were burnt. The history of villages and surnames in his collection was burnt down. Since the documents worth lakhs of rupees that he had for his livelihood were burnt down, he has become useless as a *Helavi*.

In the last twenty-five years, the *Helavi* community has stopped moving in many areas due to no one recognising its importance. In the last twenty-five years, the *Helavi* community has not received any response from the villages.

When they went to their traditional families to get records, they were looked at with suspicion. Some families refused to provide information. Some even sent the *Helavis* back, saying that genealogical records were not needed. As a result, the *Helavis* stopped coming.

The *Helavi* tradition is continuing smoothly in South Maharashtra due to strong public support. Therefore, efforts are needed to ensure that it continues in the same way elsewhere.

Also, the number of people coming from Rajasthan to tell the genealogies has decreased, or they are not coming at all, so it is expected that the *Helvas* in the rest of Maharashtra will also take up this work and keep records of genealogies.

Their Modi script is also a mixture of Kannada and Marathi. Therefore, it can only be read by *Helavi*. *Helavi's* notebook contains Kannada words in some places and Marathi words in others, so even the scholars of Modi cannot read the text written by *Helavi*.

Benefits:

In cases where genealogy is required in rural areas, the testimony of the witnesses is considered admissible in court.

Genealogy is useful when allocating land and property. It provides clarity of kinship.

Helvi is the historian of the community, keeping genealogical records dating back hundreds of years. He has the history of the ancestors of everyone in the community. In fact, the *Helvi* community has preserved a great heritage. But no one has taken this heritage seriously.

If the lineage is known, they can return to neighbouring countries or regions. They believe that this can reduce or eliminate the hostility between the two countries.

Expectations of *Helavi* from Indian or state governments:

When discussing with some people who belong to the *Helavi* community who did this work, some expectations of those from the government and system were noticed.

1. When the *Helavi* people go from village to village, they sleep in the open outside the village. They do not have better accommodation facilities, so they have to live in the open. They have

to find a nearby water supply for usage and drinking water. Therefore, they are expecting the government to provide them with accommodation.

2. The people move from village to village with their entire family. This causes inconvenience to their children's education and life. Therefore, they are expecting the government to provide school facilities for their children or to ensure that their children receive proper education in school like other children.

3. According to some *Helavi*, their families are of simple or poor economic status; therefore, they do not get the income or food they want. Therefore, they are expecting the government to provide monthly or annual salaries in the form of funds for such workers.

4. According to some *Helavi*, they should receive some form of assistance from the government to help them make their lives easier and happier.

Proposed Solutions:

To address the decline in the number of *Helavi* people who are maintaining genealogies of different families and sharing with respected family members over time, a multi-faceted approach could help preserve and revitalise this tradition. To empower this tradition, they require both cultural support and the use of modern tools. Here's a structured solution which can be helpful to preserve and to revitalised their work:

- Recording and digitising of traditional knowledge: A systematic documentation should be made of the genealogical knowledge of the elders who still know and share genealogy. Starting a project to record the oral history will help to create a permanent archive, which will be helpful for future generations and researchers to access.
- Awareness within the community itself and society: Spreading awareness about the cultural value of the *Helavi* tradition within society and the *Helavi* community itself is needful to highlight the importance of preserving this unique tradition. The related families whose genealogies are maintained by *Helavi* should provide information about their own ancestors. This activity will help to keep the records accurate and relevant.
- Creation of digital platforms for archive purposes: A mobile app or website can be developed that will help to record, store, update, and share genealogical information more easily. Younger generations who are more tech-savvy might engage more if technology is integrated. In so many cases, the next generations of family are not living in the village; they have shifted to the city, which is far from their family house. Therefore, *Helavi* finds problems to maintain the genealogy of that particular family. Hence, the proposed mobile application or website can help the family members to access and fulfil the requirements of *Helavi*.
- Use of social media platforms: Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and short-video applications can be helpful to share pedigree-telling clips and interviews. Because of this, the younger *Helavi* generation will take interest and feel proud about their heritage.
- Collaboration with expertise: Discussion with anthropologists or cultural researchers can be helpful for the study, guidance, training and preservation of the community tradition. This type of discussion and topic of community tradition can be added to the academic section at the school level.
- Derive institutional support and finance: Seek funding from cultural preservation organisations, NGOs or state government schemes to support these initiatives. The financial support can be helpful for the young generation *Helavi* to continue the tradition without economic insecurity and also to prevent the practice from disappearing over time.

CONCLUSION

This case study focuses on the *Helavi* community's rich cultural heritage, traditional occupations of maintaining genealogies, and the socio-economic hardships they are facing in the era of modernisation. This community, despite its historical significance and contributions to Maharashtra's cultural identity, still continues to struggle with poverty, lack of education, limited opportunities, and social marginalisation. It is an urgent need for cultural preservation alongside economic development, the decline of traditional pedigree-telling practices underscores.

The findings of this research emphasise the importance of targeted government policies that specifically address the needs of the *Helavi* people, including improved access to education, stable livelihood opportunities, and cultural support programmes which can help improve their quality of life. By ensuring their integration into mainstream society without the loss of their distinct heritage and giving importance to their genealogical knowledge, it is very important to empower the *Helavi* community through inclusive development, recognition of their identity, and active community engagement.

By presenting both the struggles and resilience of the *Helavi*, this paper calls for a more respectful, compassionate and culturally sensitive approach to policy-making for marginalised communities in India. Supporting these *Helavi* people is not only beneficial for them and their community but also helps to preserve an important part of Maharashtra's traditional knowledge and factors of social history.

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Figures:

Figure 1: Community



Figure 2: Baad- Note book of writing



Figure 3: Records of family used to communicate about genealogy

