

# ROLE OF KOLI WOMEN IN PRESERVING CULTURAL PRACTICES OF KOLI COMMUNITY, WEST COAST, MAHARASHTRA

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## INTRODUCTION

In all cultures, women are the key custodians of ancestral knowledge about intangible inheritance, such as cuisine, handicrafts, art, and customs. Not only do they preserve and convey the secrets of these old methods, but they also innovate by adapting these practices to meet the needs of modern-day aspects while retaining authenticity (Nagwa, 2021). As a result, it is extremely important to draw attention to the importance of women's roles in the cultural & traditional elements, as ignoring these roles has catastrophic effects for societies' distinctive cultural practices, particularly in context of globalization and the disappearance of many traditional practices. Globalization and the changing economic conditions have made an impact on traditional Koli businesses and, as a result, on culture. The current study seeks the existence of women in this society, who act as a link between their roots and their culture, rituals, culinary habits, language and festivals.

### **Koli community: An overview**

Koli community is an ethnic group of people who stands out by their occupation and rich cultural heritage. Kolis are typically found along Maharashtra's coast. The tribe's principal source of income is fish business. Traditionally, the majority of the tribe's the families own a boat, either cooperatively or individually, that they use for catching fish for short or long periods of time, inshore or near the shore. The males of the households go to collect and catch the fish, which are then sold by the women at various times of the day.

### **Women in Koli community**

Factors such as urbanization, changing livelihoods, and external influences have contributed to the gradual decline, posing a significant threat to their traditional lifestyle. As younger generations pursue alternative occupations and modern lifestyles, there is a fading interest in continuing the age-old practices and occupations associated with the Koli community. But the women residing in substantial communities along the coastline have preserved their unique culture by following traditions, maintaining ethnicity in dressing, ornaments and culinary practices.

### **Role of women in preserving Koli culture and identity**

Women are more aware and observant of their culture's customs, and they are less likely to compromise on adhering to their rituals and traditions. Marriage, birth, death, and other rituals related to religion are carried out precisely and consistently. Not only do these women practice and obey these practices, but they also insist on or force other family members to do the same (Khara & Satapathy, 2022). Traditional folk songs sung or traditional dances performed at social gatherings provide an insight into the culture to the next generations.

### **Language**

Kolis speak colloquial Marathi, such as Koli and Agri. However, due to their exposure to the commercial and service sectors, they can speak Hindi reasonably well, and neo-educated Kolis can speak English. Language is essential for cultural preservation. Fisherwomen like to speak their native language both at home and elsewhere. Customers at the fish market are familiar with these fisherwomen's dialect. Word like *Mhavra*, which means fish, is commonly used. Elderly women in the family have an important role in passing on traditional stories and knowledge to their children and grandchildren, which are passed down from generation

to generation. This understanding enables future generations to connect and respect their community's culture.

### Costume/ Dressing

Koli women have a distinct style in their clothing, and every individual component is utilitarian thinking, complimenting the women's daily activities. The Koli women stands out uniquely because they have attempted not to abandon her traditional clothing despite various problems such as price increases and the scarcity of certain materials.

Traditional saree referred as *lugat* or *lugad* is 12 meters in length which is draped in unique way. Since, the unavailability of 12 meters long saree, they join two 6 meters saree and is worn usually with the unique draping style. Since these women work in wet surroundings, the length of the draped saree ends just below the knee. Blouse is referred to *Choli* which is a simple round neck upper garment. The length of the sleeves ends just above the elbow. The material used is usually cotton and is made without lining. Old ladies used to cover their shoulders and upper body with a scarf called *parkhi* or *panja*.

Richa Keshe who belong to Koli community is working in a fashion industry, specialized in visual merchandise says that, "We Kolis, do break the stereotypes of society, since our women in community has important place unlike other communities. When it comes to the attire, the old fashion had some valid reasons. She mentions, draping the *lugat* tightly helps to maintain the health of lower abdomen and flat stomach. It also helps to keep the hygiene when ladies work outdoors for hours. but due to the feasibility they drape the conventional 6 meters saree. Women nowadays also opt for simpler options like wearing a shirt instead of blouse or wearing a full-length straight gown instead of a saree. But in this fast-paced life they prefer to get ready in traditional attire for festivals and weddings in a community."

### Traditional accessories

Gold ornaments were the sole investment of the Kolis who did not believe in bank accounts and invest almost all their savings in gold and flaunted with it. Koli women are fond of heavy gold jewelry. They wear traditional and distinctive Koli jewelry like *Kanthi*, a necklace with multiple gold chains and symbol of family deity. *Thawja*, *Mangalsutra* or *Ganthan* are spectacular necklaces with multiple strands of black beads that are offset by huge gold pendant with fish symbol. *Zilmil* is a kind of choker worn around a neck. *Kaap* masks the ears completely along with *kudya*. *Gathe* used to be daily used to go earrings worn. The thick golden bangles or *patla* scooped out with fish scale designs, *Waghache Tode* to add in that. The hair of the women is tied neatly into a bun so that hair do not distract or disturb them while they are on work. There are also *Chandavali*, a golden venis worn instead of flowers in the hair. Due to unfavorable financial conditions, with the diminishing yield and the price of the gold they embellish artificial jewellery, following the similar patterns as the traditional gold ones.

### Prominent Festivals

The most important aspect of any community is its festivals, which are celebrated with enthusiasm and the delight by this group. Women are accountable for initiating festival celebrations, most notably Holi, Narali Pournima, and Gauri Ganpati (Mohanty, 2020). They enrich the celebrations by preparing and distributing sweets, offering prayers, wearing in traditional attire, creating rangoli, and visiting or organizing a meeting of relatives and friends from their communities to celebrate the festivals in a more traditional manner. Though all members of a family or community participate in festivities and preparations, women are the ones who initiate them and are knowledgeable about various customs.

**Holi:** Holi, is one of the most important festivals for Kolis referred as *Shimga* by the community. They have a unique tradition of indulging themselves into the night long celebrations of *Shimga* during the night of Holi Poornima. Women carries the Mangal Kalash made up of Mud & consisting of Coconut within it in the procession, which is offered to Sacred Holi tree later. It is then accompanied by traditional ritual of lighting the Holi tree on fire considering it takes away all the bad possessions with it. "The sacred tree is symbolized and worshipped as a goddess, believing a *Holika/ Havlubai* will prosper in their business," said Nalini Tamore from Mahim Koliwada.

**Narali Pournima:** Koli community understands that the wind strengthens and changes the direction in favor of fishing after this day. This is the day that Kolis celebrates the start of the new business season. On Narali Poornima, they worship to the Sea God and perform boat pujas before beginning their fishing season by offering a coconut to the sea. Ganesh Nakhwa, a researcher mentions that, "they pray to sea on the day of Narali

pournima, but before that they pray their mothers and sisters. They do not pray to sea unless they tie *Rakhi* from their sisters. That is how important fisherwomen in the life of fisherman.”

**Gauri-Ganpati:** The Gauri festival is held with the Ganapati celebration. Most of the rites are similar those of Hindu groups, although all the offerings are made of fish. Offering crab or curry with *Nivti* or mudskippers is highly worthwhile. The celebration is mainly symbolic in nature, as fishing is an important job among Kolis. It is largely to connect with tradition for emotional reasons, as well as to provide an opportunity for socialization, fun and relaxation.

“The *naivedya* of crabs or mudskippers found in low-tidal and intertidal mudflats of sea creeks and estuaries is both a celebration of the goddess and a request for protection and prosperity. The mudskipper, at the lower level of the food chain, is an indicator for healthy mangrove habitats and ecosystems because it only survives in creek waters with balanced pH levels. Its disappearance signals water contamination and disturbs the food cycle,” said Vaishali Koli, a fisherwoman from Uran, Alibaug.

### Culinary Traditions

The traditional food of the Koli community is as unique as its culture and people. A cuisine that has its own distinct flavour is distinctive to their culinary etiquettes. This fishing community is regarded one of Maharashtra's oldest and ethnic clans (Hajare & Hajare, 2016). They rule the sea and keep their signature cuisine style. Their basic meals are fish curry and rice, although their weddings feature a variety of delicacies prepared primarily by women. Caterers or hotels which specialized in this community's cuisine are hard to come by, therefore the fisherwomen pass down traditional food preparation knowledge through generations. Nowadays, Koli food festivals promoted by women contributes to the tourism business.

Rajni, along with her three daughters, runs a kitchen and hosts authentic meal arrangements at her home in Versova Koliwada, Mumbai, for people from all over the country and throughout the world. Harsha, one of her daughters mentions that, “The meal that they prepare is not available at any restaurant. They have hosted about 200 diners; they were not hosted back but also learn much more about the community and culture. There is a new sense of respect in the eyes of the guests for them. Once the meal is done, these also help convert a few diners into loyal customers for this family and interesting fact is that even the locals having stayed in Mumbai for so long do not know much about the community.” As technology has advanced, several Koli women began promoting Koli cuisine through social media.

### CONCLUSION

Despite being in one of the toughest professions in India, the Kolis women makes for brilliant ambassadors of their community. With the advent of technological advancement and globalization, women in the fishing community bear the responsibility of conserving their tradition while also modifying and adapting to new day challenges for customs and cultures. The presence of women in this community, serves as a bridge between their roots and their culture, customs, festivals, food habits and language.

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