

# Socio-Cultural Status of the Helava Community in Karnataka: A Historical Analysis

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## Abstract

This study presents a historical and socio-cultural analysis of the Helava community in Karnataka. The Helava community, traditionally associated with agrarian labour and rural service-based occupations, forms an important part of Karnataka's social structure. The paper examines their historical background, traditional livelihood patterns, cultural practices, and contemporary socio-economic conditions and identity. The study is based on secondary sources and aims to understand how modernization, urbanization, and economic transformation have impacted their traditional way of life. The findings indicate that, despite gradual socio-economic changes, the Helava community continues to face issues of marginalization and limited access to development opportunities. The study emphasizes the need for inclusive policies to ensure their socio-economic empowerment and cultural preservation.

**Keywords:** *Historical background; Helava community; occupational structure; livelihood patterns; socio-cultural practices; traditional occupations; identity.*

## 1. Introduction

The Helava community, also known as Helavaru, holds a distinctive socio-cultural position in Karnataka's historical and traditional landscape. Traditionally recognized as bards and genealogists, the community has played a vital role in preserving oral histories, family lineages, and regional memory systems. Their work has been deeply embedded in agrarian and pastoral societies, where they functioned as custodians of ancestral knowledge and social documentation. Through their itinerant lifestyle and ritualized storytelling practices, the Helavas contributed significantly to the preservation of cultural continuity in rural Karnataka. This study explores the socio-cultural status of the Helava community by examining their historical origins, occupational practices, and evolving identity within changing social and economic contexts.

## 2. Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study, titled "Socio-Cultural Status of the Helava Community in Karnataka: A Historical Analysis," are as follows:

- To examine the historical background of the Helava community in Karnataka.
- To understand the traditional occupational structure and livelihood patterns of the community in the state.
- To analyze the socio-cultural practices, customs, and identity of the Helava community in the state.

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### **3. Research Methodology**

This study on the socio-cultural status of the Helava community in Karnataka adopts a qualitative research approach to understand the historical, cultural, and social dimensions of the community. It is primarily descriptive and analytical in nature, and focuses on examining the socio-cultural practices, occupational roles, and historical significance of the Helava community in Karnataka. It is based on secondary sources, including books, scholarly articles, research papers, journals, academic resources, ethnographic studies, cultural documentation, and relevant websites.

### **4. Historical Background of the Helava Community in Karnataka**

Historically, the Helava community has been part of the social and service-based fabric of rural Karnataka. In traditional village structures, such communities formed an essential part of the rural economic system, and their social status was largely defined by their occupational roles within the rural hierarchy.

The Helava community, commonly identified with the Helava or Helavaru tradition, is a semi-nomadic and occupational group in Karnataka known for preserving oral histories, genealogies, and folk narratives. The term “Helava” is derived from the Kannada root “helu,” meaning “to speak” or “to narrate,” reflecting their traditional role as storytellers and record keepers of village histories.

#### ***4.1 Ancient and Medieval Origins***

Historical accounts and oral traditions suggest that the Helava community has existed in Karnataka since the medieval period (around the 12th century CE). They are believed to have emerged at a time when written documentation was limited in rural society, and their primary role was to preserve family genealogies, caste histories, and local legends through oral recitation. Some traditions associate their institutional development with the era of social and religious reform movements in Karnataka, particularly around the time of Basavanna, when the oral transmission of knowledge became an important cultural practice in many communities.

#### ***4.2 Traditional Occupation and Social Status***

The Helavas functioned as travelling genealogists and oral historians. They visited villages periodically, maintaining handwritten or memorized records of family lineages, births, deaths, and marriages. They recited these histories in a rhythmic, song-like manner and updated the records during each visit. As noted in ethnographic accounts, they were sometimes referred to as “custodians of village memory,” because they preserved histories that were not formally recorded in official documents.

#### ***4.3 Cultural Practices and Lifestyle***

The community has traditionally followed a semi-nomadic lifestyle, travelling from village to village with their genealogical records. Their performances combine storytelling, ritual recitation, and folk singing. These narrations were often rewarded with food grains, gifts, or money, which formed their primary livelihood. Their oral tradition is deeply linked with regional culture, and they have historically interacted with multiple caste and community groups, preserving the shared memory of Karnataka’s rural society.

#### ***4.4 Geographical Distribution***

The Helava (Helavaru) community is mainly a semi-nomadic group found across Karnataka, with a strong presence in both the northern and southern parts of the state. Traditionally, they move from village to village while performing genealogical and oral-history services.

#### ***4.5 Major Regions of Settlement and Movement***

The community is widely distributed in North and Central Karnataka, especially in districts such as Belagavi, Bagalkot, Vijayapura (Bijapur), Dharwad, Gadag, Haveri, Ballari, Davanagere, Chitradurga, and Uttara Kannada.

They are also found in parts of southern Karnataka, including Bengaluru Rural and Bengaluru Urban (in smaller groups) and the Kolar and Chikkaballapur regions.

## 5. Traditional Occupational Structure and Livelihood Patterns of the Helava Community in Karnataka

The Helava community in Karnataka (also known as Helavaru or Pichiguntala) is a semi-nomadic community. Traditionally functioning as hereditary bards, genealogists, and archivists, they historically travelled to villages to recite and update ancestral lineages. They are among the few communities in India to make traditional family archiving a distinct source of livelihood.

### 5.1 Traditional Occupational Structure

The primary livelihood of the Helavas relied on their specialized role as oral and written historians.

- **Genealogical recitations:** Small groups of Helavas historically visited different households in rural areas. They would sing or lyrically narrate the family lineage, adding details about newly born members or recent marriages to the family tree.
- **Archiving methods:** The community preserved ancestral records across centuries, maintaining handwritten documents that sometimes dated back to copper plates and palm leaves. In modern times, these handwritten archives are typically wrapped in a fluorescent pink shawl and carried over the shoulder.
- **Patronage and remuneration:** They were historically patronized by landed communities such as the Vokkaligas and Lingayats. In exchange for updating and recounting a family's lineage, the community was rewarded with donations in cash, food grains, brass vessels, gold jewellery, and clothing.
- **Legal and social sanctity:** The Helava archives are so precise and ancient that civil courts in Karnataka have occasionally accepted them as valid legal documents in family partition suits.

### 5.2 Livelihood Patterns

- **Nomadic movement:** The community has traditionally lived a semi-nomadic lifestyle. Historically, families travelled across districts on foot or in bullock carts, camping in makeshift tents on the outskirts of villages, at bus stops, or in temples.
- **Gender roles:** The men were traditionally responsible for genealogical visits and recitations. Women generally managed household chores, reared livestock, and occasionally gathered herbal medicines from the locality for the family's healthcare.
- **Seasonal variations:** The pace of their nomadic lifestyle was often dictated by the seasons. They typically established temporary base camps during the rainy season and increased their travel and visitation frequency during harvest seasons, when farmers were most likely to have agricultural produce to share.

### 5.3 Modern Socio-Economic Shifts

- **Occupational decline:** With the advent of computers, government census records, and modern documentation, traditional oral archiving is rapidly declining. Younger generations of Helavas are often hesitant to take up their ancestors' profession due to its fading social recognition and the stigma associated with itinerant traditions.
- **Informal labour:** Many families have transitioned to more settled, urbanized lifestyles. To sustain themselves, they frequently rely on informal labour such as construction work, street vending, mat-making, and agricultural or manual labour.
- **Social marginalization:** As a marginalized semi-nomadic tribe (often categorized under Category-1 of the OBCs), the community faces challenges in accessing formal housing, education for their migratory children, and official identity documentation such as ration cards.

- **Advocacy and future:** Organizations such as the India Foundation for the Arts, along with various independent journalists, have documented the community's plight in an effort to preserve its rich heritage. The Helavas also continue to advocate for greater government recognition and support.

## 6. Socio-Cultural Practices, Customs, and Identity of the Helava Community in Karnataka

This section focuses on the socio-cultural practices, customs, and identity of the Helava community in Karnataka. The Helava community, also known as Helavaru, is a semi-nomadic group in the state. Traditionally serving as bards and genealogists, their identity is deeply rooted in the preservation of oral histories and family lineages for agrarian and pastoral communities. They continue to serve as a crucial pillar of folk tradition and collective memory in the region.

### 6.1 Origins and Historical Identity

The term Helava or Helavaru is derived from the Kannada word heluvavaru, meaning “those who speak” or “narrators.” The community traces its origins to the Pichiguntala community from the Telugu-speaking regions of present-day Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. During the 12th-century socio-religious movement in Karnataka led by Saint Basavanna, members are believed to have migrated into the region to propagate Shaivism and maintain genealogical records. Traditionally, under various patrons, they documented the pedigrees of Chaturtha Jains, Lingayats, Vokkaligas, and several Kuruba clans. In some instances, these records carried legal authority in regional courts for resolving property and partition disputes.

### 6.2 Socio-Cultural Practices and Customs

- **Genealogical archives:** Clad in distinctive traditional attire—often a white shirt, dhoti, a black coat, and a Gandhi cap—Helava men visit client families. They carry carefully preserved bundles of records containing pedigrees that can trace bloodlines back ten to twenty generations.
- **Family system:** When a Helava member visits a household, they lyrically narrate the ancestral history, update the records with recent births, deaths, and marriages, and are given offerings in cash or kind in return.
- **Nomadic lifestyles:** While some families have settled on the outskirts of villages, especially in regions such as Kolar and North Karnataka, many continue a semi-nomadic way of life, migrating in bands and using bullock carts or tents for shelter.

## 7. Conclusion

The Helava community occupies an important place in Karnataka's cultural and historical framework as a preserver of oral tradition and genealogical memory. Despite socio-economic transformations and a declining reliance on traditional record-keeping systems, their contribution to sustaining family histories and community identities remains significant. The shift from a predominantly nomadic lifestyle to partial settlement reflects broader changes in rural society, yet their cultural role continues to hold symbolic and historical value. A historical analysis of the Helavas thus highlights not only their enduring legacy but also the need to recognize and preserve such indigenous knowledge systems within contemporary society.

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