



OCCUPATION OF YERUKALA TRIBE IN RAYALASEEMA REGION OF ANDHRA PRADESH

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Introduction

The tribal population of the country, as per the 2011 census, is 104.3 million constituting 8.6% of the total population. There are over 705 Scheduled Tribes notified under Article 342 of the Constitution of India, spread over different States and Union Territories of the country. Many tribes are present in more than one state. The composite State of Andhra Pradesh had the largest tribal concentration in South India with the population of 5,918,073 constituting 7 % of the total population. These Scheduled Tribes (STs) are indigenous, have their own distinctive culture, geographically isolated and are low in socio-economic conditions. The present paper attempts to discuss the occupation of Yerukala tribe inhabiting in Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh.

Yerukala is one of the numerically largest tribes in Andhra Pradesh. During the British period, it was declared as a criminal tribe. Despite the large size of the tribe, not much of written material is found on the tribe in the state of Andhra Pradesh. However, some literature on the tribes in other states, which are supposed to be synonymous with Yerukala, is found. Such tribes are 'Kaikadi', 'Koracha' and 'Korava'. Even the literature available on Yerukala of Andhra Pradesh deals with certain specific aspects of the tribe like crime¹ and kinship². Jakka Parthasarathy of Tribal Cultural Research Institute, Ooty, Tamil Nadu undertook more comprehensive study of Yerukalas³. Like in all the other tribes under study material collected during the field work is extensively used in writing the ethnography / ethnohistory of Yerukalas.

Yerukala has a separate dialect called 'Yerukala Bhasa', is a mixture of Kannada and Tamil languages. But all the Yerukalas in Andhra Pradesh speak Telugu, the regional language. In this they are as good as any others. The Yerukala settled in semi-urban and urban areas and some even settled in villages seem to have forgotten their dialect and now only speak 'Telugu', the regional language.

Name, Origin and Past

The name 'Yerukala' is said to have been derived from the Telugu word 'Yerukal' meaning 'knowing'. 'Knowing' in the case of Yerukala is being referred to the Sooth saying or for fortune telling activities of Yerukala women, one of their economic activities. As quoted in Thurston D. Oppertssyas that "it is highly probable, that the name and the occupation of the fortune telling 'Kuruvandlu' or 'Kuluvandlu' induced the Telugu people to call the tribe *Yerukalavandlu*⁴. Thurston also quoted Balfour who says "the Koravas or a certain section of them i.e., Kunchi Koravas, were named as Yerka Korwar and they called the language the spoke 'yerkel' – the word *yerkel* undoubtedly stands for Yerukala and *Kurshi* for Korcha"⁵. Thus, suggesting the derivation of the name from their language.

In Andhra Pradesh while the community is named as Yerukala and Korcha, in other neighbouring states it is named as Korava and Kaikadi etc. About their origin, there are many folk tales. One tale among the Yerukala of Anantapur District claims that they are the descendants of Dharma Raja of Mahabharata and a woman whose profession was fortune telling married to him. It says, when Dharmaraja was in exile along with his brothers one day went for hunting into the forest and met a



beautiful woman who offered to tell his fortune, he fell in love and married her and the Yerukalas are the descendants of this couple.

Yerukala is divided into a number of sub-tribes. They are (1) DabbaYerukala, (2) YeethapullalaYerukala, (3) KunchapuriYerukala, (4) KarivepakuYerukala, (5) UppuraYerukala, (6) Nara Yerukala, (7) KavaliYerukala, (8) ParingimugguYerukala, (9) VooruYerukala and (10) Peddintigollalu⁶. All these sub-divisions except one are based on their traditional occupations, the exception being the ‘VooruYerukala’ meaning the Yerukalas who live in villages. DabbaYerukala means those who use bamboo to make baskets and material equipment, YethapullalaYerukala use the reeds of ‘EathaChettu’ (Phoenix Sylvestres) Kunchapuri manufacture broom sticks, KarivepakuYerukala gather curry leafs *Karivepaku*, UppuYerukala sell *Uppu* (salt), NaraYerukal make hemp for the sale, KavaliYerukala act as watchmen to the fields of farmers, ParingimugguYerukala sell a kind of white power made with white stones to draw patterns in the front yards of the houses in the villages. The last one, “*Peddintigollalu*” does not fit into the category, because neither the Yerukalas nor the ‘*Peddintigollalu*’ agree that they are related to each other. Even the opinion of the others in the villages is that they are two different communities altogether.

Nowadays, the occupational distinctions among the different sub-tribes have almost disappeared and all of them call themselves as ‘Yerukala’ only. However, it does not mean Yerukalas have no sub-tribes. It is divided into three sub-tribes. They are (1) BidariYerukala, (2) KunchiYerukala and (3) DabaYerukala. KunchiYeruakala is again divided into three sub-divisions. They are (1) JakkalaYerukala, (2) PamulaYerukala and (3) KothulaYerukala. Sub-tribes and sub-divisions of KunchiYerukala are endogamous.

Clan and Lineage

As mentioned earlier Yerukala is divided into three main sub-tribes, which are endogamous, and each sub-tribe is further divided in clans (gotra) and these clans are again divided into lineages called ‘*intiperlu*’. Both clan and lineage are exogamous in nature. People belonging to a clan trace their descent from a mythical ancestor, while that of lineage to a real ancestor. It is difficult to provide the exhaustive list of either clans or lineages among the Yerukala. Even Yerukalas are enable to give the list. However, a few of the clan names of BidariYerukala and their associated inteperlu (surnames or lineages) may be mentioned here. Balari is divided into three clans. They are (1) Kavadi, (2) Sathpadi and (3) Mendragutta. Though each of these clans is constituted by innumerable “*intiperlu*” a few of them recorded in the field as well as mentioned by Mr. Parthasarathi⁷ are shown below.

Sl. No.	Name of the Clan	Name of the Lineages
1.	Kavadi	Kampa, Kedri, Lokineni, Munga, Pannars, Poojari, Rageeri, Vallage.
2.	Sathpadi	Etta, Gopu, Kommeri, Koneru, Manka, Mota, Parsam, Poloila, Pola, Ragulu, Sampathi.
3.	Mendragutta	Devarakonda, Gajjela, Katari, Surusuru, Uligitti, Vallabayi.

Occupation and Economy

A glance at the names of the sub-tribes of Yerukala reveal that most of them are related to forest based occupations. For example, DabbaYerukala made baskets, winnowing fans, wattles etc., with bamboos,



while YethapullaYeruakala make some material equipment like baskets with the reeds of '*Eathachettu*' (*Phoenicysylvestris*), KarivepakuYerukala collected wild '*Karivepaku*' (Curry leaves) in the forest for barter and sale. Again '*KunchapuriYerukala*' made brooms with the leaves of '*Ethachettu*' (*Phoenix sylvestris*) etc. Probably, it is a mistake by the earlier writers to divide the Yerukala into subtribes on the basis of occupant because even today one can notice a Yerukala family making baskets, selling curry leaves and brooms. Not only this, for example the Yerukalas of Kurnool District made their baskets with bamboo because bamboo was once available free in the Eastern ghats of Kurnool District, while in Anantapur District bamboo is not available but '*Eathachettu*' (*phoenix sylvestries*) has abundant wild growth. Probably the occupations of so called sub-tribes actually suggest a single tribe utilizing various resources in the forest and the environment in their subsistence economy. This assumption is supported by the Yerukalas throughout the state during the field work.

But one can make a distinction based on how they organized their traditional occupations for subsistence. Those Yerukalas who use bamboo for making various articles usually lived on the fringes of the forest and made their articles on order from the villagers as well as for free fro barter and exchange for cash. When they visited the villages for selling their ware, they also took orders from the villagers and supplied them in stipulated time and received immediate payment either in kind or in cash. Not only this, they also collected '*Karivepaku*' (curry leaves) and dried them in the in the sun and stored them and whenever they visited the villages along with their articles they also sold the curry leaves to the villagers. These 'Yerukala' in course of time did establish close relationship with families in the villages but it was not a patron-client relationship. The elderly Yerukala men and women still remember that to a few families in the villages they did give curry leaves free because these families not only purchased large number of articles but also offered them free food.

Those Yerukala groups who lived as part of main villages did enter into patron client relationship mainly with agricultural families. Because agricultural families not only required baskets, brooms, winnowing fans and wattles but also hemp for rope making, large baskets called '*Jolla*' to carry fodder to their cattle from the place of storage to the cattle shed and '*dolla*' large open wagon type to be fixed on thebullock carts to transport grain. For the supply of these articles to the farmers they received remuneration in kind at the time of harvest. With non-agricultural families they had purely business transaction, i.e., received payment in kind or cash immediately.

Another occupation particularly associated with Yerukala women was '*Sode*' (fortune telling) by reading the palm. Not all the women were engaged in this profession, only a few of them and this tradion were passed on from mother to daughter. These women when their husbands were busy in selling their wares engaged themselves in palm reading and received in return grain, old clothes and sometime cash. Today one rarely comes across the Yerukala women engaged in this occupation.

Yerukala was declared as a 'criminal tribe' during the British period. The British Government of India 1871 passed the Criminal Tribal Act and those communities which were considered participating in criminal activities were brought under this regulation for special surveillance and for rehabilitation. This act was amended in 1908 and 1911. In 1911 Act classified criminal tribes into three categories. They are (a) originally criminal but had settled down to honest occupations, (b) tribes committing crimes periodically far away from their place of living and (c) nomadic tribes in theirwandering indulging in crime when ever opportunity arises. Yerukala was named as a criminal tribe under 'C' category. It is very difficult to say to what extent the 'Yerukalas' participated in criminal activities and



in what type of crimes? The present day Yerukalas deny that their fore fathers ever participated in criminal activities. Whatever may be the truth declaring the ‘Yerukala’ as a criminal tribe resulted in (1) moving Yerukala families at least some of them to colonies specially created for them and (2) police surveillance on them intensified. With the result, some of the Yerukala families were denied access to their traditional forest resources and unable to make a living with any other occupation. A few colonized Yerukalas like Yerukalas of Stewartpuram colony located near Chirala in Guntur District intensified their criminal activities⁸. Added to this, reservation of forests around 1890s also lead to the harassment of Yerukalas by the forest administration. Gradually, forest administration tightened its grip and after India’s independence the rules and regulations became more stringent and Yerukalas were no more permitted to take the bamboo from the forest but had to purchase from Bamboo depots started by the Forest Department. Further, Government of Andhra Pradesh began issuing contracts for tapping toddy from ‘*Eathachettu*’ (Phoenix sylvestris) and those Yerukalas particularly of Anantapur District who depended on phoenix sylvestris for material suffered a lot because the people from ‘Ediga Caste’ (traditional toddy toppers) opposed the Yerukalas extracting raw material from these trees.

Present Occupation

Today Yerukalas are more or less leads a settled life. Still majority of the Yerukala live in villages while a few of them migrated to semi-urban and urban areas. In rural areas they follow a combinations of occupations including their traditional occupations. The occupations among the rural Yerukalas noticed during the field work are (1) basket making, (2) making of brooms, and ropes (3) mat and bag making, (4) agriculture, (5) curry leaf selling, (6) fuel wood and fruits selling, (7) sheep and goat rearing and selling (8) milk selling, (9) bonded labour, (10) carpentry. Many families combine various occupations mentioned above to sustain themselves. For example, some families combine their traditional occupation with rearing of goats on small scale, a few, agriculture with agriculture labour some others agriculture with keeping milch cattle. Very few have become bonded labourers with big farmers. A few of them do own land, but they are marginal holders and cannot sustain themselves only an land and have to take up other occupations.

Adoption of grape cultivation, horticulture, and silk worm cultivation by the farmers in Anantapur District has definitely boosted the traditional occupation of Yerukalas i.e., basket making round large *thattis* for rearing of silk worms. Around 1906s grape cultivation became very popular in Anantapur District and the farmers required thousands of baskets during the season to pack grapes and export them to cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad. Only people who could make them fast and in large number are Yerukalas. Further, these baskets did not require any sophistication like other baskets. This boom continued for two decades i.e., from 1960s to 1980s. During this period, the Yerukalas say they were fully engaged in their traditional work. The cultivation of grapes declined due to scarcity of irrigation water due to frequent droughts. Till sericulture became popular around 1985 in the district, the Yerukalas faced economic difficulties and mostly depended on agriculture labour and making on order traditional articles like baskets, brooms etc., when sericulture took roots in Anantapur District their traditional occupation once again received a boost among many of the families in the tribe. According to many Yerukala families, this was the time they began selling the ware required for sericulture in semi-urban and urban areas. Because the round shallow *thattis* are so large they cannot be taken around the villages for selling, the cultivators have to come to them for purchase. The villages surrounding semi-urban and urban areas found difficulty in travelling to the Yerukala settlements and to other villages where Yerukalas are located to purchase the *thattis*. Noticing this need a few families of Yerukalas migrated to semi-urban and urban areas and began selling these *thatties* at fixed locations.



Further, Rayalaseema Districts and also a few districts in Telangana are drought prone. Drought now-a-days are very frequent because of climatic changes and lowering of ground water resulting in unemployment and under employment to the rural poor pushing them to migrate to urban areas. All the migrant poor usually settled in urban slums and at the borders of semi-urban areas. There was demand for these populations for building there makes shift huts and the Yerukalas settled in these areas met this demand. One can notice Yerukala families selling thatching grass, leaves, baskets, bamboos and winnowing fans etc., in the urban areas of Anantapur, Kurnool, Chittoor and in all other districts.

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