



YERUKULA COMMUNITY IN ANDHRA PRADESH: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

India is the land of many tribal groups. Every tribal has inherited a unique history, language and culture from their ancestors. Yerukula is one among the principal tribes in Andhra Pradesh inhabiting in and around the forest areas of Nallamala. They are semi-nomadic and gradually settled down in the plains. They have their own dialect called 'YerukulaBasha', an admixture of Dravidian languages. It is a wandering tribe connected with such occupations as basket making, stealing, begging and fortune telling. Due to modernization social and culture changes are taking place in this tribe. At present the tribe inhabits in all the parts of Andhra Pradesh particularly in Rayalaseema region. The paper attempts to record their traditional life and the changes taking place in the social organization of this tribe.

Keywords: Tribal Communities-Isolated – Indian Constitution– Segregated – Programmes – Policies – Laws-Hill Tribes-Andhra Pradesh – Awareness -Inhabiting.

Many tribes have existed in India since time immemorial. They are the autochthonous of the land before they arrived of the Aryans. Each tribe has its own unique history, language and culture which might have been derived from their traditional occupation that made them diversified in their social structure, organization ethos and style of living. This has always fascinated scholars to study them from different angles in order to establish the authenticity in their origin and development in the process of social evolution.

Several definitions of the word 'Tribe' appeared in the literature but in so far the Indian context is concerned, the Census of India 1921 considers them as "groups of a common language and a common action in warfare". However, Majumdar defines them as "a group speaking a common language and inhabiting a common territory".¹ He further describes them as a "collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name, members of which occupy the same territory, speak the same language and observe certain taboos and have developed a well-assessed system of reciprocity and mutuality of obligations"².

The term 'tribe' is not defined in the Indian Constitution but the word suggests simple folk living in the hills and forests. In classifying them certain contradictory criteria tend to be used by administrators, anthropologists or social workers who take color of the skin, customs, language and living conditions or even other considerations that they think necessary. The International Labour Organization has classified the same people as 'indigenous'.³ Roy Burman (1964) explained the difference between an ethnic group and tribe and remarked that any hereditary group with shared values, style of life, exclusive symbol of identity and consciousness of kind can be considered as an ethnic group. Obviously an ethnic group shares many features with tribal social organization but all ethnic groups are not tribes. Generally, a tribal community has historical association or prerogative in respect of some productive resources, an ethnic group may or may not have such prerogatives. Besides, while tribal societies are relatively closed societies, all ethnic groups may not be closed societies to the same extent.⁴



The present research paper has been initiated with a view to study all aspects of Yerukula community inhabiting in different parts of Andhra Pradesh in order to record and high light their traditional society belonging to different categories based on their economic traits even though they are synonymously known as Yerukalas. Yerukala people are a tribe found largely in the southern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Yerukala are an indigenous people who have low status in modern India. They are called Yerukula after their women's traditional profession of fortune telling. This have a language their of own, Yerukula. Many of them also speak Telugu and Hindi and they can communicate with those outside their group.

The present paper has been carried out with the following objectives.

Aims and Objectives of the study: The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To trace the historical consciousness and perspectives of the Tribal community.
2. To understand variations among the Yerukala community in view of environmental, historical, socio-economic, political, geographical settings inhabiting the present area.
3. To study the specific characteristic features of each sub-division, an important aspect in view of their social divisions.

Yerukala: A Tribe defining

In Indian context the term tribe has been defined precisely and satisfactorily. The problem of defining a tribe has been with the anthropologists and administrators for quite sometime.⁵ According to S.C. Dube, “In our thinking so far the term ‘tribe’ has been used rather loosely, and even anthropologists who have made the study of such communities an important part of their professional activities have not been able to develop a set of precise indices to classify groups as ‘tribal’ or ‘non-tribal’⁶. The term tribe or tribal may have different meanings even for anthropologists, in the past, leaving aside the historical reasons why and how a section of India’s population was classified under the category ‘tribe’. After independence, they were re-designated as scheduled tribe or commonly called ‘adivasi’. However, the concept of scheduled tribe or adivasi, as conceived by the Indian administrators, continued to differ from that of anthropologists.⁷ Today anthropologists and administrators use the same definition and refer to the list of scheduled tribes for the purpose of recognizing a tribe. Though the debate has been largely unproductive, it should be noted that while scholars looking for an apt definition, they were keen to distinguish clearly a tribe from a caste⁸. Naik(1968) attempted to understand the word ‘tribe’ based on certain conflicting definitions which deserve special mention. Even though he concluded that we don’t know what exactly a tribe mean and suggested the following criteria to define it.⁹; A tribe to be a ‘tribe’ should have the least functional interdependence within the community, It should be economically backward, which mean that the full import of monetary economics should not be understood by its members, It should have primitive means of exploiting natural resources; The tribe’s economy should be in an underdeveloped state; and It should have multifarious economic pursuits. It should inhabit in a comparative geographic isolation from others. Culturally, members of a tribe should have a common dialect which may be subject to regional variation. A tribe should be politically organized and its community panchayat should be an influential institution. The members of a tribe should have the least desire to change. They should have a sort of psychological conservatism making them stick to their age old customs. A tribe should have customary laws and its members have to abide by the rules of law in a court because of their ethics.

In partial corroboration of the above, the late Prof. Majumdar defined tribe as “A social group with territorial affiliation, endogamous, with not specialization of functions, ruled by Tribal Officers,



hereditary or otherwise, united in language or dialect, recognizing social distance from other tribes or castes but without any stigma attached in the case of caste structure, following tribal traditions, beliefs and customs, ill bearer of naturalization of ideas from alien sources, above all conscious of a homogeneity of ethnic and territorial integration. As various definitions on tribe are not apt the definite nature of the tribe according to Dube, in his introduction to 'Tribal heritage of India', that, "the long debate over the definition of a tribe having proved sterile, it may be best now to look at it as an ethnic category defined by real or putative descent and characterization by a corporate self-identity and a wide-range of commonly shared traits of culture. Hence, tribal ethnicity should be studied both in its expressive and instrumental dimensions".¹⁰

Let us see how far Yerukalas exhibit the tribal characteristics. The Yerukala believe that they were the original inhabitants of the country. This support the opinion given by Elwin Verrier that the Criminal tribes were the natives of the country. Yerukulas reported that they belonged to one of the Dravidian family of Languages, i.e, Tamil. The Yerukala are reported to be called the people living in hilly area possessing nomadic character and were used to travel from one place to another.

They have their distinct common dialect called 'Yerukalabasha' and they are identified with their peculiar dialect. They could easily be identified whether or not a stranger was a Yerukala, through their dialect. Among 'them' it is also observed that they have been subjected to regional variation. For instance, a Yerukala in Tamil Nadu would use more Tamil words and in Karnataka, more Kannada words while talking among themselves in a 'Yerukala dialect'. Their economy was too backward and was isolated geographically and hence has a little contact with outsiders. They hardly use money as a mean of exchange and are divided into three large endogamous groups on the basis of their traditional occupations which will be dealt in the following lines. However, it is worth mentioning that tribal characteristics are not rigid in Indian social structural context. Ghurye (1949) and Naik (1968) did not totally agree with the view that the tribal characteristics are strictly tribal in nature. They feel that when the tribes lived in the village organization, they became part and parcel of the tribes living in the village structure which is found in a similar aspect at Kurugunta and Balappagaripalle villages in Anantapuramu and Kadiri taluks of Anantapur district respectively in an ethnographic study point of view.¹¹ In a general sense, while defining the political organization of a tribe Schapera, suggests "that aspect of total Organization which is concerned with the establishment and maintenance of internal co-operation and external independence could be heuristically defined which could be useful in understanding the political system of a primitive society. The society of a tribal population is generally compact. The cohesion and solidarity among its people are chiefly maintained by an unwritten law which is systematic and integrated. The dominant feature of Yerukala's political organization is it's Kula panchayat which adjudicates all disputes arising in it. The members of the Kula Panchayat are the elders of a Yerukala settlement. Each kula panchayat has a headman called Berumonusha. The kula panchayat processes all disputes between the members of a Yerukala settlement. When the kula panchayat is not able to get the truth through negotiation and oral examination, it resorts to various sorts of ordeals to get at the truth which may include such activities as dipping fingers in boiling oil, lifting a red hot crowbar etc. They believe that an innocent person will not be harmed whereas the guilty would get hurt and thus exposed. The kula panchayat has the authority to impose fines, punishment and excommunicate the guilty."¹²

Etymologically the word 'Yerukala', is derived from the Telugu word 'Yeruka' which means foresight or disclosing the facts about the future, present and past of one's life. The word 'Yerukalachepputa' (in Telugu) mean fortune telling. This is done by the Yerukala women. Dr.Oppert's opinion supports this



view and he says that “it is highly probable that the name and the occupation of fortune telling kuruvandlu or Kuluvandlu induced the Telugu people to call this tribe Yerukalavandlu”¹³. But a few authors like Balfour assigned that they got their name through their spoken language. According to Balfour (encyclopaedia of India)”. The Koravas, or a certain section of them i.e., the KunchiKoravas, were known as YerkalKoravar, and they called the language they spoke Yerkal the word Yerkal undoubtedly stands for Yerukal and Kurshi for Korha”¹⁴

In the ethnographic survey of Hyderabad city conducted at picket, Secunderabad area, it is stated that Kaikadi is a Maratha term for Yerukalas and that Yerukalas in certain parts of Telangana region are popularly known as Kaikadi (Census of India, A.P. 1961 :12).It may be summarized, therefore that he Yerukala, the Koracha or Korcha, the Korava and kaikadi refer to the same group of people.

Basic Character of Tribes in India: In fact several scholars like Ghurye (1943/59), Elwin (1943), Roy Burman (1968 / 69, 1972, 1983), Vidyarathi (1977), Naik (1968), etc. in their approach critically mentioned the general characteristics of Scheduled Tribes based on views of Anthropologists and socialists to the tribal question by similar equivalence and ambivalence. However, Majumdar (1968) though completely not free from contradiction showed more sensible and mature understanding taking different situations of acculturation, including conversion to Christianity, expressed as “ But so long as the tribe maintains homogeneity, consciousness and territorial integrity, it still remains a tribe”¹⁵. Similar, but exclusive explanation has been suggested by Dube (1977:35) could be taken as a clear step towards the basic character of tribes in India at present being of five-fold classification as under: Aborigines living in seclusion and uninfluenced by recent culture contact; Tribal groups which have developed their association with neighbouring village folk and modified their economy but which still retain tribal vitality and distinctive social organization; Tribes which retain their tribal organization, but live in common villages mixed with other castes, sects and religious groups; Tribes which have been forced to accept a degraded status of untouchables as a result of unhappy culture contact; Tribes enjoying high social status because they had a better economic status and political influence.¹⁶

While explaining the difference between an ethnic group and tribe Roy Burman(1994:67) remarked that any hereditary group with shared values, style of life, exclusive symbol of identity and consciousness of kind can be considered as an ethnic group. Obviously an ethnic group shares many features with tribal social organization but all ethnic groups are not tribes. Generally, a tribal community has historical association or prerogative in respect of some productive resources, an ethnic group may or may not have such prerogatives. Besides, while tribal societies are relatively closed societies, all ethnic groups may not be closed societies to the same extent.¹⁷

Tribal Culture inhabiting in India

It is clear from the above discussions that Scheduled tribes in India have been defined with specific character and identity because of their distinguished life-style and hence been considered a tribal culture inhabiting different parts of the country.

In the Presidential list of 1950 contained 212 scheduled tribes. This list was revised upwards in 1951 containing a total of 225 Scheduled tribes with a population of 19.40 Millions comprising 6.28 per cent of country’s population of 361.15 Millions. However, a decade later in 1961 the number of tribes



declared are 427 embracing a population of 29.88 Millions which accounts for 6.80 per cent of the country's total population of 439.07 Millions.

But according to 1981 Census the total number of tribal communities account to more than 51 Millions (51,628,638) which constitute 7.76 per cent of India's population. Linguistically, the tribes of India are broadly classified into four categories: 1. Indo-Aryan speakers; 2. Dravidian speakers; 3. Tibeto-Burmese speakers and 4. Austro speakers. There are 400 tribal languages indicating that most of them have their own language but in most of the cases their languages are unwritten ones.

Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Tribes and their Ethnic Composition

In case of Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Tribes vary in their ethnic composition and occupied a small patch of areas situated in the heart of the state, especially covering Amarabad in Mahaboob Nagar district and in Nallmala hills in Kurnool district. The scheduled area covers 11,595 sq. miles distributed over eight districts containing 4,346 agency areas. Most of the tribal area is bordering the states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. The border tribes who indulged in crimes over the borders in search of better occupations and marital relations such as Gonds, Kolam, Naik pod, Pradhan, Koya, Bhagata, Valmiki, Savara, Khond sand Gadaba constituting almost 1/3rd of the total population of Andhra Pradesh. The remaining Scheduled Tribe populations such as Yanadis, Kurukulas and Sugalis are mostly scattered amidst the plain living non-tribals. Even some of these tribes are found living in adjoining plain areas who are under the process of symbiosis with other people living in plains. The total population of S.T's (33) accounts to 13.24 Lakhs constituting 3.68 per cent out of 6.8 per cent of the State's population.¹⁸ Among them Yerukulas are one of the important Scheduled Tribe populations inhabiting mostly in the districts of Krishna, Guntur, Kurnool, Anantapur, Nellore and also in some parts of Chittoor and Kadapa districts. They are chiefly distributed all over India but they go by name Yerukala in Andhra Pradesh but are known by several names in Southern states as Koravas in Tamil Nadu, Korachas or Karmas in Karnataka and Kerala. They speak a Dravidian dialect called 'Kurru' or 'Yerulaki.', which is probably an admixture of Tamil and Kannada. They have Proto-Australoid characters. For the purpose of inclusion in the Encyclopaedia and identification of Dravidian tribal communities the Government of India listed them state wise in which Yerukulas comprised from numbers from 118-124 as the residents of Andhra Pradesh with seven sub-divisions within a homogeneity of ethnic and territorial integration as suggested by Majumdar (cited in Govt., of India 1986-87:551). According to 1961 Census State wise population of Dravidian Tribes the Yerukulas comprise 1,28,024 in Andhra Pradesh alone which do not show the analysis of language spoken and according to 1981 Census of India the Yerukulas form an important South Dravidian language speaking groups account to 73,975. However, under fourteen tribal communities who are returned as speaking South Indian languages, eighteen are of Telugu and among them Yerukulas who speak Telugu (according to 1971 Census) are 36,000. Whereas, according to Singh, KS and Manoharan, S (1993: 270-350), the Yerukulas (Kapparaltippa, Katherollu, Korcha and Kuncheti) form under the tribal communities that have been grouped under the Dravidian language noted under brackets.¹⁹

Traditionally, one and a half century ago, the Yerukalas were nomads. Their economic activities are basket making, rope making, mat weaving, fortune telling, etc., but some of them engaged in snake charm, tattoo makers, musicians, acrobats, weaving brushes and sellers of salt, tamarind curry leaf and pulses, etc. moving from one village to another. Apart from earning through their traditional occupations, in recent times, some of them are resorted to anti-social activities like robbery, decoitery and petty thefts. When the criminal behaviour of Yerukalas became a problem during British Government, it felt to take necessary preventive steps by declaring the entire tribe legally as criminals.



Therefore, British Government enacted the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871 with the assumption that unless the entire tribe was put under certain preventive measures and restrictions it would be difficult to detect the professional criminals. However, due to preventive measures for the last one hundred and fifty years there has been a drastic and remarkable change in their society. The Yerukalas, either on their own accord and an account of the effort of the Government, have settled in and around the villages, semi-urban places and urban centers by pursuing their traditional occupations besides adopting certain non-traditional ones and economic pursuits. Hence changes are noticed in their sphere of social, political and religious life.²⁰

How much or how far the Yerukalas have moved away from their traditional social, cultural frame work cannot be assessed on the basis of information available in the form of Census reports, administration accounts, police records and early ethnographic records. First hand information about Yerukalas either before or after their transition is scarce. Most of the available literature provides information on the origin, distribution, dialect, social division, physical traits, religion, political, economic and criminal activities but not kinship system, authentic historical perspectives of Yerukalas.

Conclusion

During Pre-British period, the tribal communities in India remained either fully or partially isolated from the country, and they remained backward. The British policy of isolation increased the misery of the tribal communities. The founders of Indian Constitution seriously considered the miserable conditions of the tribals who were segregated from the national mainstream and provided for special measures. Since independence, the government has initiated several programmes, policies and laws and has made efforts for gradual socio-economic development of Scheduled Tribes, but they still remain the weakest sections of the society, there has been a considerable increase in the fund allocation for the tribal areas. But most of the tribals were not able to draw benefits from the facilities provided by government because of large-scale corruption among officials and improper implementation of tribal development schemes. Therefore, the majority of the hill tribes in Andhra Pradesh suffer from the absence of proper infrastructure and communication facilities. Improper management of schemes and inefficient implementation of suitable programmes in the tribal region create a major problem. The majority of the tribal people are not even aware of the development schemes implemented by government agencies. Without creating awareness among the tribal people, it is difficult to achieve better results.

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