



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

IN SCIENCE, ENGINEERING, TECHNOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT

Volume 9, Issue 10, October 2022



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

Impact Factor: 7.580



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Representing Cultural Practices of Yerukala Tribes in Telangana Region

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ABSTRACT: Yerukala or Erukala or Erukula is a Tamil tribal community primarily found in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The population of Yerukala tribes according to 2011 census is 519,337. The total literacy rate among Yerukula is 48.12%. Most live in southern coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema, with a smaller minority in districts of Telangana. Their native language is Tamil based Yerukala but most have shifted to Telugu. They were vilified in British sources for being habitual criminals, and so were placed under Criminal Tribes Act, although they were underrepresented in the population of criminals and were most likely targeted for their nomadic lifestyle. Cultural activities of the Yerukala community in Guntur and Nellore districts are very special. We can see all these on the days of moonlight, festivals, marriages and when the “petharlu” are performed. While on work, the women sing in their language to forget the tiredness of their daylong work. Separate songs are sung at the time of planting, harvesting, and when the harvest is brought to the threshing floor. In addition, there is a tradition of singing songs early in the morning, when the wife and husband are pounding the grain. In the Yerukala community, we can observe the practice of equal participation of men and women in the cultural activities. Playing on the flute, made out of the tender parts of the bamboo sticks, are practiced as a custom by the Yerukalas of Dabbala area in Nellore and Guntur districts. In the same way, they also play “pulizoodam” which resembles today’s chess.

KEYWORDS: Yerukala, tamil, telugu, nomadic, songs, cultural, chess, participation, community, population

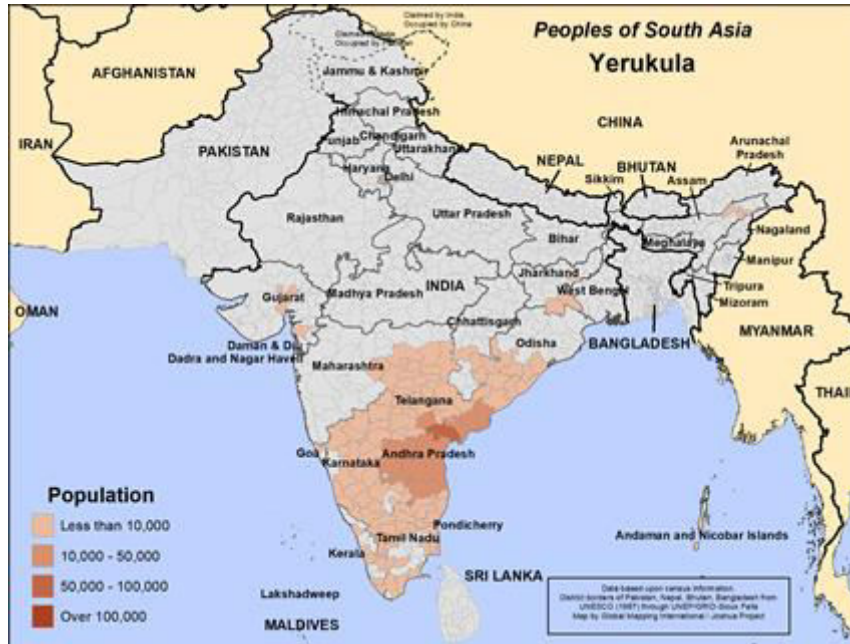
I. INTRODUCTION

The Yerukalas is a tribal community in the Andhra region of India. It is believed that the tribe first appeared in the north of Cuddapah district (Thurston). The Telugu speaking people call them “Erakavaru” or Erukala varu” which suggests their practice of fortune telling. Among the traditional caste occupations of these people, weaving baskets and rearing pigs are important. These are male-oriented occupations. But women also play a crucial role in financially supporting the family.[1] The main occupations of women are: Sode chepputa (Fortune telling), Pachcha podavadam (Tattooing), and Mugguluveyadam (Making designs on the soil). With the help of these, women will contribute to the house management expenses. Telling “sode” is the community’s salient feature. In fact, the community derives its name from this work. The sode system of kurru (yerukala) tribes is very special. “Gadde” is another name of “sode”. This is a part of astrology.



Yerukula tribal women weaving bamboo baskets

There are different forms of astrology such as sankhya sastramu, prasna sastramu, hashta samudrikamu (palmistry), puttumachchala sastramu (based on moles), sakuna sastramu (omen), etc. Telling sode is also prevalent in some old ancient tribes such as in Yanadi where sode is called “Rangam” Only a Yerukala woman is allowed in these occupations. The sode telling woman is called “Yerukalasani” in Andhra region and “Kuruvani” in Karnataka region. We can easily recognize the Yerukalasani from the way she is dressed up and the kind of instruments she carries with her. Moreover,[2] her slogan “Sodemma...sode...sode chebutanu...sode” (I will tell your fortune) will inform the needy people about her presence. When one sees her wearing a beautiful sari and her hair tied in a tuft and with a saffron mark in the middle of her forehead, one feels as if the village goddess (gramadevatha) is coming to their house. The instruments she carries with her include a basket specially made with palm leaves, kollapuri made out (adusu) of gunny bag in the size of the palm and some cowries decorated with saffron and turmeric powder, mantra dandam (magic stick), and sode burra. If she is a nursing mother, she will carry her child tied in her sari-made bag. The sode takes remuneration only in the form of grains, but not in the form of money. Depending on the amount of grain given as remuneration,[3] it is measured as three types which are mudu solala gadde (three measures), aidu solala gadde (five measures), yedu solala gadde (seven measures). This sode is told for a long time in detail in a melodious tone by the Yerukalasani with her loquaciousness that attracts her customers very well.



Yerukula in India people group profile

The sode telling women recites the names of different God and Goddess remembering them and pleading to them in devotion to give her their word. She feels as if possessed by the God and that God is talking through her mouth. In this way, she talks in a trance and satisfies the sode listeners by explaining causes and solutions to their problems. Some of the sode tellers pick out few grains from the chata (winnowing basket), count them and then tell the result with the help of numerological knowledge. The women who take up the profession of fortune telling are not only the breadwinner of the family but also enjoy the privilege of restricted freedom. Wherever she goes during the day time, she comes back home by the same evening. [4]When she travels long distances, she is accompanied by someone trustworthy. In the absence of travel facilities, sometimes the sode tellers would stay overnight in the houses of their acquaintances. To introduce a new yerukalasani into this profession, the community choose a Sunday after her first menstruation. On that day, they give a feast to their relatives. But the practitioner fasts for the day. After the completion of the feast, they close the practitioner's eyes with a cloth and make her eat a mixture of boiled rice, green gram, black hen, black pig, black goat and fresh blood. She has to eat at least three mouthfuls of this mixture. They believe that after eating this mixture, if she does not vomit, she could become a good sode gathe (fortune teller)! [5]

The most pitiable thing is that nowadays the sode art is gradually losing its valuable measures due to the entry of dishonest people into this art. Once it was a sacred art, a blessed gift of Parvathi Devi. It believed that the goddess Parvathi Devi once tested the skill of a man belonging to koracha caste in making a cradle. He successfully passed the test. Impressed by him, the Goddess gave the art of fortune telling in the form of sode to this community. From then onwards this caste entered in to this profession. She also gave her mantra dandam (magic stick) and chata as gifts and in the place of chata they are using kollapuri nowadays. As this art is a gift of Parvathi Devi (a Goddess), it is very sacred.



Parvathi Devi

So those who enter the profession of sode-telling used to be very devoted. They have to be chaste and they should never lie. As a result, these sode-tellers used to be talkative. Whatever they say would happen. They used to catch the real or true nature of the incidents that happened in the past and those incidents that are going to happen in the future, naturally. They used to observe "vokka poddu" (fasting) in some particular days, and once in a year visit their deity who gifted them with the "vaksiddi" and offer their gifts to the Goddess. Moreover, they worship "Shakti" (Power Goddess).

Tattooing is also one of the traditional occupations of Yerukalas. Tattooing of Yerukala woman is a different one. They tie some needles as a bundle and make the tattoo. They use juice of some leaves to make tattoos. The tattoo using the juice of these leaves will remain for life long. There is no chance of it fading away. It shows that these people have a good knowledge of the herbs and its usages. Tattooing is one fine example of their talent in exploring and utilizing of their natural resources. [6]Tattoos are made in different forms and in different shapes to make good diagrams and pictures to please interested persons. Hands, forehead and temples are much preferred parts of the body for tattooing. These people used to lead a nomadic life. Now they established a standard habitation. Those people who have this tattooing as a profession are called with different names in different areas. They are called Dayyalollu (people of devils). Yerukulollu, Pachchabotiolu and Peddeti Gollalu in different areas. They all use the Kurru language. So they are all treated as Yerukalas. Many people believe that if they make tattoos on their body after their death, the devils won't eat their body.

II. DISCUSSION

Yerukala women and young girls wake up early at the dawn and sprinkle the vaakili premises with water and kallapi, and decorate it with rangawalli or rangoli. During the nights under the moonlight all the women are girls in the community come together and dance in circles holding each other's hands singing songs. In some areas they will play "uppu aatallu" and "chedugudu aatalu". The Yerukalas of Prakasam and Guntur districts share many norms. They fast during festival days. They perform the feasts and festivals with care and devotion. On these nights, they call all the storytellers among their community and listen to the devotional stories. They have their scholars who can recite the stories about the Ramayana, the Bhagavatha and the stories of local Katamaraju's Veerabrahmendra Swami, Ankamma Katha, and Thirupathamma Katha, etc. Marriages are performed mostly at the bridegroom's house in the community. At the time of marriage, there are songs describing the bride and bridegroom. The bride's relatives sing songs about the bride and the bridegroom's relatives sing about the bridegroom. In this tradition, only women sing these songs. [7]As a part of the marriage "Vasantham aata" (game of spring) is also played. To the happiness and excitement of the community, at first, the bride and bridegroom start to play the game. The bridegroom pours (sprinkle) the colour water on the bride and later the bride pours the colour water on the bridegroom with metal mugs (generally bronze). The event starts and thus prolonged until the whole community including the elders also participate and enjoy.



“Petharlu” is a ceremony practiced in the remembrance of the elders who have passed away in the community. On these occasions, edibles and clothes of the departed elders are kept for them in the house with the belief that their souls will come and taste the offering. The vistharlu (plates made out of stitched leaves) served with food are kept in the house along with the clothes of their liking and they come out of the house leaving no one inside the house. The elders (male) and paternal relatives in the house take sedative drinks and enjoy them with a rhythmic dance. After the dance, they eat the food kept as samples for their elders, taking a bit from each assuming that the elders had blessed it. Either the elders or paternal relatives wear the clothes. Only men take part during the time of Petharlu.

Some special songs are sung to forget the effect of scorching sun, hot air and the daylong fatigue of labour while planting the seedlings that come out of freshly sworn seeds. An example of such a song is Patha padu patha padu patu kunje / Nanantha patha padure Gudakunje. Similarly, there are songs to sing at the time of kalamulu (threshing floors) and early in the morning when wife and husband pound the grain i.e. paddy, millet, spiked millet, etc. In this community, the newly married couple will have one meal for the day as a feast in each and every house. The unity among these people is obviously visible from this practice. This custom is not observed to perfection nowadays.

Villu (bow) is one of the weapons used by the Yerukalas from the ancient times. They are experts in hunting the birds with bows. Yerukalas used to live mostly in forests, and protect themselves from the wild beasts in the jungle with the bows. Though these are not in use now, still villu could be seen some houses. Yerukalas used to do karrasamu (fighting practice with stick) for their self-protection. This karrasamu art is practiced during the festival season. Some villagers teach it to their children early in the morning. With the help of karrasamu, we can also block stones thrown on us.[8]

The Yerukala tribe is predominantly a tribe of catapults. They tie an elastic ribbon strip at both the sides of a “V” shaped stick and make it a slingshot. They keep a small stone in the middle of the elastic ribbon and target the birds. As it hits strongly, there is scope for the bird to fall down

Yerukalas are experts in playing songs with flutes that are made out of bamboo sticks. They can play at a stretch without any break by breathing from the nose and blowing it into the flute through the mouth. They make these flutes themselves.

In rural areas, the “kolanna” or “kolatam” is specially performed in thirunallu (day and night fairs) and jathara (night fairs). Yerukalas play this kolatam especially during those times. “Kolu” means a small stick in the Yerukala language.



Kolatam playing with sticks

And kolatam is played with kolu. This kolatama is rhythmically played to the drums with sticks while singing songs in the Yerukala language. Generally, six to ten people form into team and dance systematically, singing songs, and beating the sticks rhythmically. This is mostly prevalent in Nellore and Guntur districts, and still practiced in rural areas. Besides these cultural practices, Yerukalas use or make instruments thus becoming part of their lifestyle. Some of the instruments are: Kolli (big sword), Thattu (basket), Gade (storage tin), Isurudu Rayi (dry grinder), Mutha Butta (basket with a lid), Marram (knife), Amuduku Voluku (lamp with castor oil), Gundrai (round shaped stone). Garisa (a big pot to store grains), Beru Manika or Thavva (used for measuring grains), Kaavidi (used for bringing the water), Kallu Muntha (used for drinking toddy), Vutti (useful for keeping their edibles high above from dogs), Vuchchulu (to catch the birds), Bonulu (to catch some type of animals like rats), Theddu (weden spoon), Veduru Lotalu (bamboo glasses), and Matti Mookudu (clay bowl).[7]

III. RESULTS

The Yerukalas community is an ancient yet rich in terms of cultural practices—right from fortune telling to song, dance, archery, tattooing and rangoli making. The community not only knows the art of making their own instruments for labour and entertainment, it lives life fully with various cultural activities embedded in almost all parts of their lives. This study documents various cultural practices of the Yerukala community belonging to two districts of the Telugu state of Andhra Pradesh. These Tribals inhabit the plain areas of Telangana with a population of 1.44 lakhs, concentrated around Hyderabad, Rangareddy Districts. They speak yerukalabasha. Their main occupation includes piggery and Basket weaving. Their traditional culture includes Sooth Saying by women. Their main festival is Nancharamma jatara.



Nancharamma Talli Temple

Education is indispensable for ensuing development among Tribals to determine their prosperity, success and security in life. In this direction, the Tribal Welfare Department, Telangana State is making every effort to provide quality education to the Tribals in the State. The Tribal Welfare Department is running 2311 Educational Institutions catering to a student strength of 2.15 lakhs. The Department is running Govt Primary Schools, Hostels, Ashram Schools (Telugu medium), Post Matric College Hostels and TTWREIS (Gurukulams)(English medium).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The institutions functioning under Telangana Tribal Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society known as "Gurukulams" aim at delivering the academic standards. TTWREIS is operating 175 residential educational institutions (From Grade V to X, Intermediate I & II Year and Degree Colleges) in English medium. The Society has been working with the motto of providing quality education to the needy and deprived ST children so as to compete with the other advantaged children. The Tribal Welfare Department is providing School Bags, School Diaries, One pair of Leather Shoe, One Pair of Sports Shoe, (2) pairs of Socks, Sports T Shirt and Short, Track Suit & Sports Kits to all inmates of TW institutions. The ashram schools are equipped with adequate facilities to enable the students to excel in the academics. The Department is providing additional amenities like furniture, Computer lab, CC Cameras and Health Command Centre for the benefit of the students apart from the basic amenities like Uniforms, Bedding Material, Plates, Glasses, Trunk Boxes, Diet and Cosmetics.[6]

Tribal Welfare Department has set up e-Studio at O/o Commissioner of Tribal Welfare, Hyderabad for providing advanced Satellite based education in Mathematics, Science and English through Tele Education for the students from Class 6 to 10. This facility is initiated in 50 TW Ashram Schools across 24 Districts in the State and 19023 students are taught 5 Classes a day spanning 45 minutes each for 200 days in a year. TSTS, Govt of Telangana has established the e-studio and will maintain it for the next 3 years

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