

Ethnographic Profile of Yerukula Tribe of Andhra Pradesh

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ABSTRACT The present paper reports the ethnographic profile of Yerukula, a plains tribe living in West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. This paper is based on the data collected through various ethnographic techniques in some villages of Narasapuram mandal. The social status of the tribe is very low in rural areas. However, they claim superior status over scheduled castes. It is a patriarchal society. And it possessed a few sub-tribes and several exogamous patrilineages. Uncle-niece marriages and cross cousin marriages are highly preferred. Child marriages are not unusual. And monogamy is common. It is a patriarchal society and patrilocal residence is the norm. People are non-vegetarians. Most of the Yerukula people are illiterate. Occupationally, these people have the history of being involved in criminal activities such as burglary and dacoity. However, many of the Yerukulas have changed their occupation. Religion of the Yerukula is animistic and the influence of Hinduism and Christianity is noticed. This paper also reports various ceremonies and rituals associated with various life cycle events namely, birth, naming, menarche, marriage, divorce and death.

INTRODUCTION

The Republic of India is a federal state with twenty-eight states and seven union territories. Andhra Pradesh, a southern state of India possessed a population of the 7.37 crores (Census of India 2001). Of this population, six percent are tribals. The majority of the people speak Telugu, the local language of Andhra Pradesh. The state harbours about 200 Hindu caste groups; thirty-three tribes and a few religious minority communities. All these groups are endogamous in nature. The Hindu caste groups are categorized according to the Hindu *varna* system, where the division is primarily into Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vysya and Sudra, and a large number of castes belong to the last category of Sudra. The scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are outside this system and enjoy special constitutional provisions for their socio-economic upliftment.

During the last few decades, many anthropological and genetic studies on these Andhra populations have been conducted. These studies revealed a considerable ethnic and genetic heterogeneity among and within these populations.

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Most of the tribal populations live in hilly agency areas, which are clearly demarcated from the plain rural and urban areas, geographically. However, there are some tribes which live in plain areas. Though there are studies on Andhra tribes, studies on plain tribes are limited. On Yerukula tribe, little ethnographic description is available (Parthasarathy 1988; Radhakrishna 2000; Simhadri 1991; Viswanadha Reddy 2003). These studies are based on Yerukula people living areas other than Godavari region. Hence, the present study was aimed to present the ethnographic profile of Yerukula, a plain tribe living in West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh.

THE PEOPLE

The Yerukulas derive their name from Eruku-knowledge or acquaintance. The origin of the tribe tells how 'renuka', who came to life with male head, and came to be known as 'Ellamma', the patron diety of the tribe. The Yerukula tribe inhabits the south coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh. Yerukula, a vagrant gypsy tribe, is bearing an evil reputation as professional criminals, and now settled as pork sellers, basket makers in Andhra Pradesh. The Yerukula migrated all over the state but basically they are from Prakasam and Krishna districts of coastal Andhra Pradesh. In the Godavari districts, these tribes rear the pigs and sell the pork. Some people depend on basket making and daily labouring while the women wander from

village to village as fortune tellers and as tattooists. They speak a mongrel dialect, which appears to be a mixture of Tamil, Telugu and Konkani. Their huts are generally funnel shaped and are made of date mats, twigs, palm leaves and coconut leaves. The men are scantily clothed, wearing a piece of cloth above the loin (*gochi*) and an old turban on the head. The women wear saris and have brass bangles on both arms.

METHODS

This paper is based on the data collected through various ethnographic techniques. These techniques included in-depth interviewing with key-informants in the community (such as village heads, leaders, etc.), informal and unstructured discussions and observation. Standard guidelines were followed during collection of these ethnographic data (Pelto and Pelto 1978). These field works were conducted in some villages in Narasapuram mandal (administrative block) of West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social Status in the Society

The social status of the tribe is very low, compared to other caste population living in the study villages. These people are living along with caste population, and the caste people in the villages consider them inferior. No caste people, other than those belong to scheduled castes (who were once considered as untouchable castes like Mala, Madiga, etc.) will accept food and water from Yerukula. However, Yerukula accept food from all castes, but not from the scheduled castes mentioned above. Also, it is to be noted that members of Yerukula are not allowed to enter into Hindu temples.

Social and Political Organization

The Yerukula is an endogamous group with a few sub-tribes namely, *Kunchel*, *Pungi*, *Buthi*, *Mide*, *Gampa*, *Bidigal*, *Tatta*, *Badigi* and *Balari*. In addition, there are several exogamous patrilineages. Yerukula is a patriarchal society and the father is the head of the family. Sons inherit the surname while daughters retain the father's lineage till their marriage.

As many of the villages are multi-ethnic, Yerukulas have a separate union (*kula panchayat*). It has a president and other office bearers, and this union settles all problems within themselves and with other people in the village. Also, this union engage in negotiating with government officials with regard to various welfare programmes for their members. Also, Yerukulas are part of the constitutionally formed village panchayat and most of them possessed voting right. In a few villages, Yerukulas were elected as panchayat members.

Customs

Yerukula is a strict endogamous group and clear exogamous lineage groups are identified. Uncle-niece marriages, cross cousin marriages (in the form of a man marrying his father's sister's daughter and mother's brother's daughter) are highly preferred. Child marriages are not unusual and some girls get married before attaining menarche. Monogamy is common but polygyny is also observed. Though marriages are fixed through negotiation and mutual consent, other forms of marriages such as marriage by elopement are also found. It is a patriarchal society and patrilocal residence is the norm. After marriage the couples live with boy's parents for some time, and afterwards, some live separately. However, a majority are joint families. Kinship is descriptive and they use specific terms to refer to their kin members.

Food Habits

Rice is the staple food of these people. The people are non-vegetarians. They have few scruples regarding their diet and they eat fowls, pork, scaly and scaleless fish, field rats, jackals, fox, cats, mongoose, carrion, etc. Most of the men drink country liquor and toddy, but rarely, they take bottled liquor. Most of the males and females smoke and chew tobacco. Though these people take tea and coffee, consumption of milk and milk products is very low.

Education and Occupation

Most of the Yerukula people are illiterate. However, a few younger aged men are literate. A few primary and secondary schools are available in their vicinity. However, a very small proportion of people send their children to these schools.

Occupationally, these tribes, from ancient times were professional burglars, dacoits, thieves and robbers. However, Yerukulas have changed their occupation. Most of the people in the present study area are engaged in occupations like selling pork, making brooms and bamboo baskets, day labouring, and making toys for children. Some people are working in private and government organizations.

Property and Economy

Basically, these people have no properties such as houses, agricultural lands, jewellery, etc. These people rear pigs and sell the pig meat (pork) in villages as well as in weekly markets. Domestic animals such as country pigs, hens and dogs are reared. Many people do not have land ownership. They usually erect their huts either in the government land or in the outskirts of the village. However, some of these people got houses constructed by the government. The property is shared equally by all sons after their father.

Religion

The religion of the Yerukula is animistic and the influence of Hinduism is noticed during ceremonies and rituals. They are polytheist. Their favourite deity is *Ellamma*, represented in various forms and worshipped on Fridays and Tuesdays. Pigs, fowls and goats are sacrificed to the deity on special occasions, and they celebrate feasts involving all their community members.

Among the other animistic deities that are worshipped by this tribe are *Pochamma*, the goddess of small pox and *Balamma*, a deity of vaguely defined functions. *Mahalaxmi*, the goddess who protects from cholera is also worshipped by these people. In addition to these, people have belief on souls of departed ancestors, and they worship them. Hindu gods such as *Hanuman*, *Rajanna* and *Mahadeva* are also worshipped. Nowadays, because of the intensive propagation of Christianity, some of the Yerukula people are converted to Christianity. The local Christian pastors have converted these tribals into Christianity.

Life Cycle Ceremonies

Birth: A unique custom of great antiquity,

which still survives among the Yerukula is worth recording in this ethnographic profile. The moment labour begins, the woman communicates the matter to her husband, who immediately retires to a dark room and lies on a bed, covering himself with his wife's clothes. When the child is born, it is placed by the side of the father. He is not allowed to leave his bed for 3 days and during this period he is regarded as being impure. But nowadays, these customs are not followed strictly. The mother is taken to the dai (*mantrasani*) or to local hospital for giving birth to the child. After delivery, the mother and child are given purification bath by anointed with oil and turmeric on the eleventh day and a feast is arranged to close relatives and friends. All these days are considered as pollution period.

Naming: The Yerukula do not conduct any specific ceremony for naming the child. The elder or head of their community in that village will give name to the child as per their tradition or otherwise the parents will name the child. Usually, they call the child with the name of their favourite deity.

Menarche: On attaining the first menstruation, the girl is secluded in a room or outside or verandah and she has to sit/sleep only on the palm leaves till the pollution period is completed. The menstruation of a girl is regarded as unclean and she is kept in seclusion. On the 6th or 10th day, a ceremony will be conducted to purify the girl. On that day, girl's mother or a close relative removes all the material used by the girl during these days. And the girl will be given bath with oil, turmeric and neem leaves, and dressed in new clothes. A non-vegetarian feast will be arranged to relatives of the family.

Marriage: When a Yerukula youth attains a marriageable age (usually below 20 years for boys and below 15 years for girls), his parents look for a suitable bride or bridegroom. After finding a suitable boy/girl and the proposal is acceptable to both the parties, a day will be fixed for the performance of the *agu madu* (betrothal) ceremony. On that day, the parents of the boy, with their relatives set out for the girl's house, by taking with them a new mat of date palm. On their arrival, they spread the mat in the open space in front of the house, and on this mat, the bride's father, their relatives and the members of the *kula panchayat*, who accompanied will be seated. The question of the bride price will be discussed. On its final settlement (to the satisfaction of both the

parties), an amount of eight rupees are given as earnest money to the bride's father. Liquor is ordered at the expense of bridegroom's father and distributed to the gathering. The first cup will be served to the girls' father, whose drinking of it symbolises the ratification of the alliance.

On the morning of the wedding day, a marriage shed (*pandal*) is erected at the bride's house. The bride and groom in their respective houses are smeared five times with turmeric paste and oil and are bathed. They worship earthen jar filled with water, twig of the pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) with five offshoots. This water is carried to the marriage place by the girl's father in the evening. As the auspicious hour approaches, the bridegroom, with a dagger in hand, is taken in pomp to the bride's house where, on arrival, he is joined by the bride coming from their house. The couple dressed in white are seated facing the sanctified pot, the bride to the left of her husband, on squares of rice drawn on a date palm mat spread underneath the bower. The throwing of turmeric coloured rice (*akshintalu*) on the wedded pair, first by their parents, and then by the other guests attending symbolises the marriage. *Pusti* is necklace of black beads is tied around the girls' neck and toe rings are put to her toes. The ceremony continues until the early hours of the morning, the bridal pair sitting up all the while. Next morning, the married couples are bathed, auspicious lights are waved round their faces by married females and milk and curds are given to them to drink. The bride is concealed in the neighbour's house by her mother and the bridegroom starting out on foot, seeks her out and carries her in his arms. That day the consummation ceremony takes place. After that the girl is taken to the bridegroom's house.

Divorce: Divorce is allowed on the ground of the wife's barrenness or un-chastity or disobe-

dience. This is affected by turning her out of the house in the presence of the *kula pedda* (chief of the community) or *kula panchayat*. The *kula panchayat* of the tribe is very strong. She is permitted to remarry. However, her first husband will be compelled to refund the amount he paid to her parents as bride price. All these disputes are settled by the *kula panchayat*.

Death: The dead are usually burnt, but occasionally buried in a lying posture, with the head placing towards south. It is said that some members are buried and some members are burnt. The ashes are either left at the place of cremation or thrown into the stream. Mourning is observed for five days, during which time the principal mourner is regarded as polluted and abstains from non-vegetarian food. On the fifth day, a feast with non-vegetarian (pork) food is given to all the relatives and friends in their community. In the name of the deceased, birds are fed with food placed in a leafy plate. Thus, the Yerukula strictly observe the death ceremony, by inviting all their community members.

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