

Yerukalas of Andhra: Tracing their Cultural Practices

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the cultural practices of Yerukalas, 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. I had the opportunity to experience the life, labour and practices of the Yerukalas people for being brought up in the same community. In this paper, an attempt has been made to trace various cultural practices of the community and document it for reference of researchers interested in the subject.

Keywords: Yerukala, Erukula, Primitive Tribes, Andhra, Sodi

1. INTRODUCTION

Yerukalas is a tribal community in the Andhra region of India. It 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. I had the opportunity to experience the life, labour and practices of the Yerukalas people for being brought up in the same community. In this paper, I have tried to trace various cultural practices of the community and document it for reference of researchers interested in the subject. My exposure of the community is geographically limited to Guntur and Nellore districts.

2. CULTURAL PRACTICES OF YERUKALAS

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. In this research, some of the prominent cultural activities of the community have been discussed.

2.1 Traditional Practices

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. 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.

Sode Chepputa (Fortune telling)

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. There are different forms of astrology such as *sankhya sastramu*, *prasna sasthanu*, *hastha 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 “Yerukalalani” in Andhra region and “Kuruvanji” in Karnataka region. We can easily recognize the Yerukalalani from the way she is dressed up and the kind of instruments she carries with her. Moreover, 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, 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 Yerukalalani with her loquaciousness that attracts her customers very well. When any human being or animal

fall ill or lose any valuable things or if suffer from some other problems, generally, people tend to approach the *sode* woman to know the reason behind their sufferings.

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. 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 *yerukalasan* 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)!

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. 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).

Pachcha Podavatam (Tattooing)

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. 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*, *Pachchabotiollu* 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.

Muggulu Veyatam (Making Rangolis)

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*.

2.2 Festivities, Ceremonies and Other Practices

Moonlight dance

During the nights under the moonlight all the women and 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".

Festivals & feasts

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

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. 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

“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*.

Cultural Songs

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 *kallamulu* (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.

Viluidya (Archery)

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.

Karrasamu

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.

Kyatball (Catapult)

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.

Flutes

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.

Kolatam

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. 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).

3. CONCLUSION

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.

(Note: This research was originally carried out by the author towards his M.Phil.)

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