



## **SOCIO CULTURAL LIFE OF TRIBES: A CASE STUDY OF YERUKALA**

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### **Abstract**

*For longer periods in history, tribes had little or no intercourse with people in the plains areas and were uninfluenced by the so called civilizing influences. The relative isolation led to their backwardness as the agents of development deployed by the mainstream state could not penetrate into the deeper forest regions. Yerukala tribe also called as Korava is an indigenous community of South India, which is a Dravidian speech variety used in Karnataka, Tamilnadu, Andhra and Telangana. This is said that Korava is another name of a Telugu dialect namely Yerukala. Several differences between both the varieties are found in recent studies. This paper explores the socio cultural practices of Yerukalas, a tribal community in the Telangana 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. 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. Sodi telling, Yerukala sani and other cultural practices discussed in this paper.*

**Key words; Civilization, Yerukala, Kurava, dravida, Sodi telling.**

### **Introduction**

For longer periods in history, tribes had little or no intercourse with people in the plains areas and were uninfluenced by the so called civilizing influences. The relative isolation led to their backwardness as the agents of development deployed by the mainstream state could not penetrate into the deeper forest regions. The situation underwent a change with the advent of the British who saw great opportunity of exploiting the forest wealth by intruding into the private spaces hitherto inhabited by adivasis. To avoid the problem posed by tribes, the British government passed the first Criminal Tribes Act in 1871 under the pretext of controlling the rate of crime. Under the Act, several tribes were declared criminal and settlements were started where tribesmen and women were lodged. The task of their management was entrusted to voluntary agencies such as Salvation Army, Chief Anjuman Islamia, Arya Samaj etc. In addition, the government too at some places was directly involved in organizing reformatory settlements. Settlements were classified under agricultural, industrial, reformatory and penal settlements.

### **Yerukala tribe**

Tribes by name Korava, Korama, Koracha, Koraga, Korra are found in different places of South India. Korava, Korama and Korra are considered under Yerukula tribe. They are known as Yrukula in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The studies have explained that the language used by both Yerukula and Korava is one and the same. However, the studies have collected data from Yerukulas of Andhra Pradesh, but not from Korava of Karnataka. Koravas are very much attached to the Kannada language and the society for several centuries. Hence, there is a need to study the Korava community independently.



The Korava variety was initially considered as a polyglot of Tamil and in recent studies it is explained as a dialect of Telugu. This speech community has sub-sects as *Ura-korra* and *Kunchi-korra* according to their living places. Though we find similarities among Korava and Yerukala in broader level but the comparative study of the speech variety can shed light on the same. This study would contribute to understand the tribe's speech variety and the structure of the same. The comparative study of Korava and Yerukala would further support the understanding of comparative Dravidian.

### **Background in Andhra & Telangana**

Yerukalas is a tribal community in the Telangana of India. It first appeared in the north of Cuddapah district (Thurston) in Andhra. The Telugu speaking people call them “Erakavaru” or Erukala varu” which suggests their practice of fortune telling. Yerukalas people for being brought up in the same community. In this paper, Researcher have tried to trace various cultural practices of the community and document it for reference of researchers interested in the subject.

Yerukalas and Katheras are two ex-criminal tribes of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. These two groups are stigmatised as dacoits, burglars, pilferers, thieves and railway wagon breakers. Stuartpuram is one of the settlements established in 1914 by the colonial government. It was an agricultural settlement put under the management of Salvation Army. The organisation executed monumental development programmes for the benefit and welfare of the settlers. They included agriculture, education, health and vocational training activities. Salvation Army enjoyed judicial powers while managing the settlement. Basic approach to change and reform of the settlers adopted by the organisation was religious in nature which as such had some inbuilt limitations. The Salvation Army was active for almost four decades before the tribal welfare department took over the settlement after independence. The organization continues its religio-social work till date. The second major attempt at reforming and mainstreaming inhabitants of Stuartpuram settlement was initiated in the year 1974 by a group of secular and a religious humanists from the Atheist Centre, Vijayawada. Criminal reformation is three dimensional process involving different kinds of actors and characters: criminals themselves, the state machinery including police/government officials and finally society at large. Of these variables, surrounding society plays a major role, either to accept or deny reformed criminals into mainstream ways of life. When this variable is in place, rest of the variables follow the suit. Samskar (NGO) represented this important social variable in the process of social reform and rehabilitation of members of Stuartpuram colony. The organisation executed its work in five phases through a strategy known as Three Generation Approach. Major emphasis of social reformers during the process had been on social integration and area development through 3G Approach. Social reform experiments in a DNT colony hint at one important historical lesson that traditional approaches to the problem of despised social heritage has reduced scope for reform of diehard avocations of hardened criminals. On the other, humanist and democratic interventions provide enough social space for bringing about the desired change.

### **Cultural and Traditional Practices of Yerukala**

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 warabgal, Khammam, Nalgonda and Nizamabad in Telangana. 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.

### **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 sasthramu*, *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 “Yerukalasan” in Andhra region and “Kuruvanji” in Karnataka region. We can easily recognize the Yerukalasan 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 Yerukalasan 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).

## 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. Piggery is prime occupation of yerukala and Sodi telling basket making also important one. This study documents various cultural practices of the Yerukala community belonging to Telugu states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

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