



BELIEFS AND CEREMONIES AMONG YERUKALA TRIBE – A STUDY IN RAYALASEEMA REGION OF ANDHRA PRADESH.

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Introduction

The state of Andhra Pradesh has the population of 26.31 lakh constituting 5.3 % of the total population in the state¹. These Scheduled Tribes (STs) are indigenous, have their own distinctive culture, geographically isolated and are low in socio-economic conditions. While the composite state has 35 Scheduled tribes there are 18 Scheduled Tribe in Rayalaseema region. Each tribe has its own habitat and environmental set up, dialect, socio-cultural traditions and historical way of life. Keeping in view of this, the present paper attempts to discuss the social structure of Yerukalatribe inhabiting in Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh.

In the state of Andhra Pradesh, the Yerukala tribe is one of the major schedule tribe, distributed chiefly all over the plains in the state but sparsely in the adjacent States like Tamilnadu and Karnataka², and few other contiguous states like Kerala, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Though, they go by name Yerukulas in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, they are also known by several names in various states as 'Koravas' in Tamilnadu, 'Korchas' or 'Kommas' in Karnataka and Kerala 'Kaikaris' in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan³⁻⁵. They speak Dravidian dialect known as 'Yerukali' or 'Kurru' which is an admixture of several Dravidian languages-Telugu, Tamil and Kannada⁶. Within Andhra Pradesh, they are more densely spread across the whole of Coastal region than they are in the Rayalaseema regions.

Origin of the Yerukula Tribe

The term 'Yerukala' is said to have been derived from the Telugu word 'Yerukal' meaning 'knowing'. 'Knowing' in the case of Yerukala is being referred to the Sooth saying or for fortune telling activities of Yerukala women, one of their economic activities. As quoted in Thurston D. Oppertssays that "it is highly probable, that the name and the occupation of the fortune telling 'Kuruvandlu' or 'Kuluvandlu' induced the Telugu people to call the tribe *Yerukalavandlu*⁷. Thurston also quoted Balfour who says "the Koravas or a certain section of them i.e., KunchiKoravas, were named as YerkaKorwar and they called the language the spoke 'yerkel' – the word *yerkel* undoubtedly stands for Yerukala and *Kurshi* for Korcha"⁸. Thus, suggesting the derivation of the name from their language.

In Andhra Pradesh while the community is named as Yerukala and Korcha, in other neighbouring states it is named as Korava and Kaikadi etc. About their origin, there are many folk tales. One tale among the Yerukala of Anantapur District claims that they are the descendants of Dharma Raja of Mahabharata and a woman whose profession was fortune telling married to him. It says, when Dharmaraja was in exile along with his brothers one day went for hunting into the forest and met a beautiful woman who offered to tell his fortune, he fell in love and married her and the Yerukalas are the descendants of this couple.

Yerukala is divided into a number of sub-tribes. They are (1) DabbaYerukala, (2) YeethapullalaYerukala, (3) Kunchapuri Yerukala, (4) Karivepaku Yerukala, (5) UppuraYerukala, (6) Nara Yerukala, (7) KavaliYerukala, (8) Paringimuggu Yerukala, (9) Vooru Yerukala and (10) Peddintigollalu⁹. All these sub-divisions except one are based on their traditional occupations, the exception being the 'VoorayYerukala' meaning the Yerukalas who live in villages. DabbaYerukala



means those who use bamboo to make baskets and material equipment, YethapullalaYerukala use the reeds of 'EathaChettu' (Phoenix Sylvestres) Kunchapuri manufacture broom sticks, KarivepakuYerukala gather curry leafs *Karivepaku*, UppuYerukala sell *Uppu* (salt), Nara Yerukal make hemp for the sale, KavaliYerukala act as watchmen to the fields of farmers, ParingimugguYerukala sell a kind of white power made with white stones to draw patterns in the front yards of the houses in the villages. The last one, "*Peddintigollalu*" does not fit into the category, because neither the Yerukalas nor the '*Peddintigollalu*' agree that they are related to each other. Even the opinion of the others in the villages is that they are two different communities altogether.

Nowadays, the occupational distinctions among the different sub-tribes have almost disappeared and all of them call themselves as 'Yerukala' only. However, it does not mean Yerukalas have no sub-tribes. It is divided into three sub-tribes. They are (1) BidariYerukala, (2) KunchiYerukala and (3) DabaYerukala. KunchiYerukala is again divided into three sub-divisions. They are (1) JakkalaYerukala, (2) PamulaYerukala and (3) KothulaYerukala. Sub-tribes and sub-divisions of KunchiYerukala are endogamous.

The deities of the YerukalaPantheon

The religion and ritual of the Yerukalas has been very greatly influenced by the contacts of the outside world. Even though it is difficult to point out today how exactly the rites and ceremonies of the Yerukalas connected with birth, puberty, marriage and death have been influenced by the culture-contacts, it is easy to provide an outline of the changed aspects of the religion and rituals.

The Yerukalas pantheon today reveals several distinct categories of deities about many of whom they themselves do not know anything. First the cults of Kolapuriamma (Goddess of Kolhapur), Akkadevathalu (Virgin Goddesses) and ancestral spirits (Peddalu). The Yerukalas keep the images of the goddesses of Kollapuramrma and Akkadevathalu exclusively within the settlement and worship them because they think it absolutely necessary to worship these divinities. A small mud platform or a wooden plank in the house represents the abode of ancestral sprits. The Yerukalas believe that the family line itself ceases to exist if the family does not worship its ancestors.

In the second category of the divinities can be placed the various family deities (kuladevathalu) like Muneeswarudu, Subbarayudu, Gurrappadu, Poleramma, Sunkularnma, Jamrnulamma, Kamachamma. Nanchamma, Kuntemma and Yellamma. In the third category of the deities can be placed the gods and goddesses who are worshipped by the Yerukalas and also by theirneighbouringpeople belonging to different castes and tribes. In this context, not only the village deities (gramma dovetail) worshipped by all the Yerukalas and non-Yerukalas alike but also the deities connected with regional and national cults and worships appear. The village deities include Gangamma, Maremma and NemaliKondaiah inKonnepalli, Poleramma and Yellamma in Kalikrri, Ankalamma, Garikalamma, Marernma, Poturaju, Lingamaiah and Tikkaswami in Nandyal. The deities connected with regional cults and worships are Gurappadu and Maddiletiswami in Konnepalli, Maddiletiswami, Pamuletiswami, Gurrappadu, Penchalaswami and Raghavendraswami in Nandyal, and Gurrappadu and Muneeswarudu in Kalikiri. The deities connected with the national cults and worships include Anjarieya, Vinayaka, Venkateswara, Narasimha, Siva, Rama, Lakshmi, Parvati, Durga, Mallikarjuna, and Ayyappa.

The Yerukalas have definite ideas about the forms and characteristics of some of their deities but very vague and indistinct metal images about some of their deities. All Yerukalas depict the forms and features of those divinities represented by idols, images and figurines but not by stone slabs wooden



poles, trees and hillocks. A vast majority of the village deities and regional deities have no material representations in the form of idols, images or figurines. On the other hand, the Yerukalas are definite in their ideals about the forms and characteristics of their deities of pan-national character for they can perceive them in numerous varieties of icons. The Yerukalas cannot explain the exact form of their ancestral spirits. They say that every organism has a soul (jivam) that it is the soul which keeps a human being living, walking and talking, that when the soul leaves the body a human being ceases to exist, that the final obsequies help the entry of the soul into the ancestral world, and that the ancestors always wish for the good of their descendants if they are satisfied by periodical offerings.

The Yerukalas are definite about the functions of all their divinities at the family, village, regional and national level. According to them Akkadevathalu and Malleamma protect from all possible dangers in the forests; Peddamma and ward off the evils from the community; Poleramma and Maremma protect the people from epidemics; Kollapuramma, Kamachamma, Nanchararama and Yerukalasan bestow wealth on them; Pothuraju, brother of Akkadevathalu cause rains; and Ganikalamma is a great lady physician who can cure any illness. The Yerukalas worship the household gods at the time of conducting life-cycle ceremonies but worship deities with special functions as mentioned above only on specific occasions. Like their caste neighbours, the Yerukalas worship Anjaneya, Vinayaka, Rama, Siva, Parvati, Lakshmi, Durga, Venkateswara and so on, on everyday or on specific days in a week or on festive occasions. Like their caste neighbours, the Yerukalas observe fasts to honour Anjaneya on Sunday, Siva on Monday, Lakshmi on Friday and Venkateswara on Saturday. Further, like the caste people, the Yerukalas too take vows and in order to fulfil them make pilgrimages to the temples of Venkateswara at Tirupati, Siva of Sri Kalahasti and Mallikarjuna at Sri Sailam, Anjaneya, Poleramma and Mahanandi at Nandyal, Narasimhaswami at Ahobilam, Gurrappa at Done, Peddamma at Gadavemula, Maremma at Ponnapuram, Veerabhadra at Kadiri, Yellamma at Kalikiri and so on. The Yerukalas are always willing to worship the Hindu divinities if by doing so they can gain some material and social advantage as they say. Like their Hindu neighbours, the Yerukalas too speak of sin (papam), virtue (punyam), result of past deeds (karma), rebirth (punarjanma), soul (atma) and Supreme being (paramatma). However, barring a few educated ones among them, they have no knowledge of the philosophical heights and spiritual subtleties of Hinduism. By reason of their close contact with different cultural groups they have necessarily assimilated a number of alien religious traits.

Festivals and Ceremonies

Just as the Yerukala pantheon today includes many gods and goddesses of their caste neighbours, the rites and ceremonies of the Yerukalas connected with birth, naming, puberty, marriage and death as well as the annual round of religious ceremonies and festivities of the Yerukalas very markedly resemble those of their neighbouring caste groups.

The old custom of naming the child after one of the ancestors is gradually being abandoned. The many pre-partum and post-partum taboos which they used to observe almost two generations ago are no more observed today. Today their pre-partum and post-partum taboos and rituals correspond to those of their caste neighbours. The couvades system disappeared almost a generation ago. Formerly their ceremonials connected with puberty and marriages were simpler and took less time. Now, it is considered more respectable to make the ceremonies rather elaborate on par with those practised by their caste neighbours. Now-a-days they employ Brahmin priests to conduct certain rituals at the time of naming, marriage and death.



The Yerukalas worship their ancestors on different Hindu festival occasions like the Ugadi (New Year Day), Sankranti (Pongal Day) and at the time of marriage and death. At the time of worship, they offer sacred food (pongali or pulagam) and present new clothes (Kottaguddalu) to the ancestors.

Apart from worshipping the ancestors, the Yerukalas worship the household gods (kuladevathalu), the village deities (gramadevathalu) and the deities of regional and national importance on specific days considered sacred to the deities themselves. When they worship the family deities and village deities like Gangamma, Maremna, Yellamma, Poleramma, Ankamma, Jammamma and Ganikamma, they go on fast on the day of worship and sacrifice animals like fowls, sheep, goat or pigs to the deities. When they worship the deities of regional importance, they follow those procedures of worship and sacrifice that are followed by their caste neighbours. Likewise, when they worship the deities at the pilgrim places and the deities of national importance they offer the vegetarian interns of food to the divinities. The very purposes of their pilgrimages are similar to those of their Hindu caste neighbours.

The annual round of festivals of the Yerukalas resembles that of their neighbouring Hindus. Mahalaya Amavasya (no-moon day considered important to the ancestors), Ugadi (New Year Day), Sankranti (Pongal day), Nagulachaviti (Snake-worship day), Mahasivarathri (night of Siva), Sri Ramanavami (birthday of Rama), Vinayachavithi (worship of Vinayaka, the god of obstacles), Dasara (a festival that includes the worship of tools and weapons and goddess Durga) and Deepavali (the festival of lights) are observed by the Yerukalas.

Beliefs

The Yerukalas like other caste neighbours also have a belief in numerous spirits and ghosts. In their thought the souls of those who committed suicide and who died of accidents become spirits and ghosts. Further, they categorize the spirits into benevolent and malevolent ones. Malevolent spirits attack human beings, more so women and children and cause then several types of illness. Blood-thirsty among them are the malevolent spirits who attack women in their periods and attack men and cause vomiting of blood.

Like their caste brethren, the Yerukalas also believe in a number of occult powers like evil-eye (dishti), evil-word (peeda-maata) and evil-touch (thaakudu) released by some persons which cause harm to the people or befall people sickness. A number of home remedies are used for treating the victims of occult powers besides using charms, talismans and magical objects as repellents of such powers.

The Pujari who is the priest and carries out the routine of the socio-religious life is also a magician to some extent. He feels the pulse of the victim of spirit attack and administers some herbal medicines, decoctions, and lotions and chants some spells to cure the spirit attacks. The Mantragadu is the magician who knows efficacious spells and can remove the evil influence of spirits and ghosts on the victims. He can even contact deities and communicate with them and bring relief to the victims of spirit possession and their evil attacks. The Yerukalas do not look up to the Pujari with much expectation. He officiates in religious rites and ceremonies and undertakes divination of the routine type. But the Mantragadu is expected to show quick results. He is fed by the people to whose houses he is called in and when he returns home he is given suitable remuneration on cash and kind. The fowls and goats sacrificed belong to him. His reward depends upon the results. Very few Yerukalas are acknowledged today to be the real magicians. The Yerukalas themselves realize and confer that they have a few magicians who really can help them in times of extraordinary difficulty. They have



therefore become increasingly dependent upon the magicians from among the caste neighbours who have given them proof of greater magical skill and ability.

Conclusion

The structure of society which the Yerukala built up in the past is rapidly moulded by the demands of the new situation. The socio-cultural patterns and customs of the Yerukalas have been influenced to a greater or lesser extent. Borrowing of traits has been a key factor in the Yerukalas. The changes are more as additions and less as alterations. Contact with caste people is more prominent. In this context, the degree of acculturation plays a vital role in shaping the Yerukalas way of life. The Yerukalas from rural areas are less mobile and have less opportunities of coming into contact with outside world. The Yerukalas of urban areas have been comparatively more mobile and in more frequent contact with outsiders. As a result, there has been comparatively more borrowing of cultural traits and hence more incorporation of variations among the latter are not be found these days. The kind of continuous happy and symbiotic interaction between the Yerukalas and the caste groups influenced the former to adopt more and more linguistic, technological, social and religious items of the latter over the centuries.

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