



## **SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF YERUKULAS IN ANDHRA PRADESH**

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### **Abstract**

*The tribes are one of the diverse groups among the Indian population. They remain disadvantaged mostly as they are considered as the marginalized sections of the Indian society since the ancient times. The tribe remains disadvantaged due to various factors like geographical, cultural, and religious isolation lack of proper health facilities, inability to satisfy basic needs, lack of control over resources and assets, lack of education and skills, malnutrition, lack of shelter, poor access to water and sanitation, vulnerability to shocks, violence and crime. 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 no vegetarians. Most of the Yerukula people are illiterate. Occupationally, these people have the history of being involved in criminal activities such as burgling 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.*

**Keywords: Yerukula- Fortune Telling-Languages-Sub-Tribes- Material Equipment-Criminal Tribe- Religion- Traditional Occupations.**

A human society is defined as a group of people living together, whether they belong to one caste, or one group engaged on an economic activity which defines the creed and social status etc. in the tribal society, it is the combination of one particular group of people, speaking one particular dialect or language, belonging to a single ethnic group, or race performing one economic activity, consumption of one type of food, experiencing one dress pattern and governed by similar traditions and customs, etc. further they are bound by a social structure of their own, significantly belonged to a single culture and a particular way of life even though there may be many sub-divisions.

The social structure in a society, sometimes defined as patterned social relations those regular and respective aspects of the interactions between the members of a given social entity. It is the social structure of a small group is generally much nearer to the activities of its members than that of a social structure of a larger society. Generally, social life is structured along the dimensions of time and space. Specific social activities are also organized at specific places; particular places for instance, are designated for such activities as working, worshipping, eating or sleeping. Here the territorial boundaries delineate these places.

According to Tylor (1871)<sup>1</sup> “culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a particular society“. Hence, no society is devoid of culture.

According to Murdock (1949)<sup>2</sup> "the family is a social group characterized by common residence, economic co-operation and reproduction, it includes adults of both sexes, at least two who maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the inhabiting



adults". Social structure is the basic concept for the proper understanding of a society. Society consists of human beings. Human beings organize themselves into groups for the achievement of some objectives or goals and these groups are called institutions.

In the present context the Yerukalas community formed a group of people, having a common language and hence been defined as a distinctive society because they are a group of interacting people living in a specific geographical area, organized in a co-operative manner, and sharing a common culture with beliefs, customs, values and activities which govern their interaction that makes it a society. Following is the presentation of Yerukala community as a social group which has a social structure of its own.

As a tribal Society, the Yerukala community reflects its own characteristic features which represent a bond between themselves inhabiting separately as group of families depending on their own economic activities. However, one can visualize that this tribal society consists of a specific character which may be interlinked between the people living as a social group. Each group as part of their own society exhibits certain specific character depending on their sub-division.

### **Origin of the Tribe**

There are different Mythological accounts tracing the origin of the Yerukalas is fabulous and mystical going back to the times of the Great Epic stories. They believe that they are the offspring of Dharmaraja, the eldest of the Pandavas. When Dharmaraja went into the exile, he met a woman who was in disguise of a fortune-teller and fell in love with him. Out of their union, there came forth the first Yerukala, who continued the profession of fortune-telling<sup>3</sup>.

There is another mythological story reveals the common parentage of Yerukalas and Boyas. "A monk with his two wives and children lived in a forest. One day there arose a quarrel between his two wives which ultimately led the first wife and her children leave the house, went into the deep forest and live there forever seclusively. The woman and her children began cutting bamboos for making baskets out of split bamboos and thence earning their livelihood. Thus the fist wife's children and their descendants came to be called Yerukalas. The monk's second wife and her children did not leave the house. They used to visit the forest, hunt the birds and animals and earned their livelihood. Their offspring too followed the same occupation. However, they came to be called Boyas. Thus the Yerukalas and the Boyas are two branches of the same stock".<sup>4</sup>

And there is another story relating to the profession of Yerukalas "Parvati, the holy consort of Lord Siva, gave a serpent stuffed with precious stones to a Medara (a member of the caste of basket-makers) and asked him to prepare a cradle out of it for her child. The Medara did not even touch the stuffed snake for he feared of the rattling noise of the precious stones inside it. Then Parvati, asked a Koracha (a member of the tribe of basket-makers) to do the job. She tightly packed the serpent with precious stones and knotted the serpent at intervals so as to avoid the rattling noise of the stones, then gave it to the Koracha. The Koracha boldly took it and split it like a bamboo, made a cradle and gave it to Parvati. Being leased with his skill, she rewarded him with a divine rod of bamboo and a winnowing fan which she has been using herself for fortune-telling. The Yerukala started living upon fortune-telling in addition to basket-making bamboo baskets, but the former still splits his bamboos from the bottom while the latter splits the bamboos starting from the top."<sup>5</sup>



According to Papua Rao Naidu (1905: 5)<sup>6</sup> “Aligaries or capermaris of Southern India are supposed to have been once an off-shoot of this great tribe.” being the Yerukalas, presently they are quite distinct from Waddars in their religion, manners, customs, language and other characteristics. When they were separated from the main tribe of the Yerukalas, they were very small in number. The displaced Yerukalas and the mixed nature of their composition, their language pattern and acquaintance with wider circles make for the distinction from the original tribe. The change in their life pattern is, perhaps, due to the fact that they are drawn from the Boyas, Gotta, Wadde and Salia castes. Both Yerukalas and Donga waddars have certain affinities both of them do not have faith or confidence in each other, other; they are notorious for falsehood; both the tribes use some medical herbs to entice people and commit crime.

### **Family**

A family custom is defined to be “the usages of a family transmitted successively (from father to son) according to law.” It generally relates to matters affected the members of a family in their relationship to each other and to the family as a unit. The stability of any society depends upon its strong pillars like marriage and family. These two primary institutions play a very vital role in developing the society numerically<sup>7</sup>

Family is the basic unit of social organization among the Yerukalas. It consists of a husband, wife and children. The unit of family relates to various relations to one another. These relations are in terms of consanguine and affinal. The family structure changes accordingly. It serves the socio-economic needs of its members. The members of the family depend upon one another for food, clothes, and for defense in danger etc. each surname group consists of several families among Yerukalas. The family is an independent economic unit. It provides food, shelter and clothing to a mother, and unmarried children and the joint family comprises of father, mother and married sons with their unmarried children<sup>8</sup>

### **Status of Families**

Among the Yerukalas nuclear families are very popular. There are two reasons why they prefer to have nuclear families. Temperamentally it is the nature of the members of the Yerukalas communities to work hard, to earn their own living and lead an independent life. Their love of independence is partly responsible for their frequent quarrels, separation and sometimes migration also.

Their ignorance and habit of drinking worsen their quarrelsome nature. Another reason for the division of joint family into nuclear ones is the lack of accommodation. Their caste occupation is such that, each family should have a large space to preserve their dry materials to spread them out for drying and keep the herds of pigs, donkeys and dogs. Therefore, to carry on the caste occupation conveniently and prosperously each household should have ample space around the residence.

In respect of the orthodox and conservative nature of the Yerukalas, the following observations of Thakkar (1950)<sup>9</sup> Is very significant. They being extremely conservative in their religious and social beliefs it is not possible to win them over to other beliefs with any amount of persuasion or attraction.

Majority of Yerukalas do not very strictly adhere to the traditional ways of treatment. They pray Maremma, Taiyamma and such Shakti Goddesses, according their beliefs and make offering to please her and to win her favour. But before they take resort to such Gods or Goddesses, they consult a “Gadde Yerukula” or “Mathamayya” in the traditional manner.



The Yerukala women are popular for their gift of foretelling and these women have got their own way of narrating the future. There is one case of such 'Gadde' Yerukala woman among the selected settlements. She is 70 years old and is respectfully designated by the people as 'Awa' meaning grandmother, she has a very big family with growth up sons and daughters, daughter-in-law and grandchildren but they are all living independently, although the old women is in close contact with all of them and treat them as members of her own family.

She remained a prostitute under the designation 'Basavi' implying a kind of religious service based on sexual activities. Her daughters have also continued the same profession of the mother although they are not designated as Basavis.

The old Gadde Yerukala community women have got a place of deity in her house. She has placed two oil lamps which are lighted up when she is called upon to foretell. At the outset she sits before the lamps, sings one or two songs emotionally and then suddenly gets transported or entranced and in that state of divine transportation she appears to be reading something from those two lamps and goes on telling about the future.

### **Surname Groups**

The Yerukala tribe is further divided into various surname (intiperu) groups. Family is the basic unit of social structure among the Yerukalas. Its primary functions are procreation, child rearing and educating children besides economic activities. Man with his muscular superiority does difficult tasks like basketry and their woman does the helping them.

### **The Exogamous Sects**

Yerukalas are composed of several exogamous sects or surnames (intiperulu). Each exogamous sect of surnames comprises a number of families who commonly trace their ancestry to an animate or inanimate object. Thus there are two gothras and 39 surname groups among the Yerukalas in Ahobilam.

1. **Eddu Yerukala:-**This group of families were said to have carried on their business on the back of oxen and hence were called Eddu (oxen) Yerukala. They took paddy and salt from place to place.
2. **Gadida Yerukala:-**This group conducted business on the backs of assess and were called 'Gadida' (assess) Yerukala.
3. **KohulaYerukala:-**This section of families engaged in making the monkey's performance. Hence they were called 'kothula (Monkey) Yerukala.
4. **Eetha Yerukala:-**This section of Yerukalas mainly engaged in the occupation of making mats with palmyrah leaves thus making money for livelihood and hence were called 'Eetha' (dale palm) 'Yerukala.
5. **Dabba Yerukala:-**This group of families mainly engaged in the occupatz making baskets with bamboo and making money for livelihood and hence were called Dabba Yerukalain Ahobilam area all the Yerukalas belong to sub-tribe dabba Yerukala only.

### **Structure of Yerukala Society**

The Yerukalas is a Scheduled Tribe in Andhra Pradesh; it is neither included in the Hindu Varna system, nor listed in the outcastes. On the basis of their survival and habitations, either by shifting or semi-permanent nature of settlements, always in connection to village settlements, either traditionally defined or on their accord, or considered to be primitive people, hailed from hills and were called



Girijans (giri = hill, jana = people). However, originally, there seems to have no occupational categories among them unlike other caste groups did. Primarily, they survived in the hill areas by taking up certain occupations such as finishing, doing criminal activities, sooth saying etc., subsequently they have been associated with those occupations and they have become their traditional occupations.

Among the Hindus, the Brahmins hold the highest place traditionally they have done the job of officiating at the ceremonies to all castes except Yerukalas, Boyas, Yanadis, Malas and Madigas. But recently a Brahmin does not hesitate to perform the ceremonies of Yerukala community.

### **Political Organization**

There is a Kulapanchayat (tribal council) so great is its prestige that it's members are called Peddamanushulu(elders). The chief of a settlement is called Berumanusha(bigman). He is elected on the basis of age, intelligence and influence, his love for the community and his ability to solve problems. He presides over all the meetings, and he is honored at all social functions. The elders decide disputes regarding to sex, property, loans, territorial encroachments in the exercise of right to collect minor forest produce, quarrels and disputes regarding to sharing of stolen goods. They do not like to have their disputes discussed before others, and prefer settlement at their own councils. Trial by ordeals such as dipping fingers in boiling oil, lifting red-hot crow-bar, carry pot full of water without spilling a drop, walking through fire, etc. In the presence of the gathered elders, and Berumanusha, or typical for proving the innocence of the suspects. The Kulapanchayat is also responsible for the safeguarding of social norms, violators being subject to reprimand as the lightest and excommunication as the severest punishment. An excommunicated person may be re-admitted only if he admits his guilt and takes an oath that he/she will not repeat it.

Monogamy is the common and widely prevalent form, polyandry being prohibited. Marriage with an elder sister's daughter is preferred. Junior surrogate is allowed. Bride price(solluponnu) Rs. 48/- fixed is payable to the maternal uncle of the bride (Telugu: menamama); It is the inflexible rule that on the occasion of the marriages of the first two daughters of a woman, the bride price must be given to her brother, even if his own sons are the grooms. The usual age at marriage for the girls is between 14 and 16, and for the boys 18 to 20. Widow Remarriage is allowed in the Yerukala community which is dealt in the next sub-heading.

### **Role of Kula Panchayat**

The society of the Yerukala is generally compact. Its cohesion and solidarity are chiefly maintained by the unwritten law – which is systematic and integrated. The dominant feature of the Yerukala political organization is its Kula panchayat. The members of the Kula panchayat are usually elders who are called Peddamonushulu and the head of the Yerukala settlement is called the Berumonusha should be between 35 and 55 years of age and when he crosses the age of 55 he ceases to be the Berumonusha though he may continue to command some influence on the Kula panchayat. The Berumonusha presides over all proceedings and is given an honourable position at all social function. Cases of the following nature are taken up for arbitration in the Kula panchayat- disputes relating to sex, disputes regarding property and loans, disputes regarding land and quarrels between the individuals or families. Usually they do not like their disputes to be discussed and decided by other castes and hence they try to settle all their disputes amount themselves.



The Kula Panchayat may decide the dispute in one sitting or adjourn for several sittings. The Yerukala believe that the ordeals would decide the righteousness or otherwise of a person in a dispute. The alleged culprit is expected to go through the ordeals without any pain or discomfort if he is innocent. The Yerukala believe that behind these ordeals is the divine power which will protect the innocent and punish the guilty. It is important to note that before the ordeal takes place the Kula Panchayat makes all efforts to arrive at the truth on the basis of available evidences. Apart from solving disputes regarding theft and petty matters, the Kula Panchayat is also responsible for the maintenance of social order in the community as per the norms of their society. If a man fails to fulfill the norms of the society he is suitably reprimanded and if the violation is serious he may be ex-communicated from the community by the Kula Panchayat.

They are part of the wider social, political economic and legal system. The statutory panchayat does not give any separate recognition to the customary law of the Yerukala which means that if any law of the state is violated by the Yerukala, though sanctioned by the community, the state law will prevail. Legally this restricts the activities of the Kula Panchayat to residual matters. Here it is necessary to state that the officials who are concerned for village administration are a potential source of conflict and challenge to the Yerukala customary legal system. But this activity also depends upon the physical existence of the territory of the Yerukala. The Yerukala are free to act according to their customary law.<sup>10</sup>

### **Kinship**

W. H. R. Rivers<sup>11</sup> says that kinship is nothing but the social recognition of biological ties. In all societies we do find kinship systems, terms, and usages. This is very much needed to bifurcate the relations which will enable the people to understand relations. Marriage is one such area wherein people take lot of care about totemic take symbol of each other's clan. This helps the people to avoid Sagotra marriages. They have four important clans such as Kavadi, Satpadi, Manpadi and Mandrugutti.

### **Kin Groups**

The family among the Yerukalas of every sub-tribe is patrilineal and patrilocal. It is a unilateral residential kin group, consisting at parents and their children; only unmarried daughters are being regarded as the members of the family. Even though the patrilocal family is the normal type, in a few rare cases one can find stray examples of patrilineal but matrilineal families.

In all the sub-tribes, the Yerukala family, apart from catering to the elemental biological instincts of sex and perpetuation of the sub-tribe itself, performs certain other important functions. It is a distinct economic unit, performing important functions of earning livelihood, providing shelter and giving at least a minimal material comfort to its members. Socially, it looks to the conservation and transmission of the tribal traditions and heritage, folk-ways and folk-customs, folklore and folk songs and literature.

Next to lineage, there is the clan or surname group locally known as 'Intiperu'. It is based on stipulated descent. Each clan has a name and is exogamous. The primary function of a clan is the regulation of marriages. The surnames indicate the distinguished ancestors, acts of the ancestors, the ancestral places, the objects with which the ancestors have been in close association like animals, plants, plant products, artefacts and such other things. The clans are not corporate groups. In the normal course of life no sense of solidarity among the members of the same clan exists but the organization of clans as



exogamous units is still important and occupies a very significant place in the Yerukala social structure. In the social life of the Yerukalas, considerations of clan are brought in mainly on the occasion of marriages.

A number of clans (intiperulu) combine to form a phratry known as Gotram. A phratry is a patrilineal stipulated descent group. A sub-tribe has four phratries namely Kavadi or Nallapottula, Sathpadi or Mandlavaru, Manipati and Mendragutti. The four phratries are obscurely connected with the various services performed to the Lord Venkateswara of Tirupati. Sathpadi means adorning Venkateswara with flowers, jewels and vestments; Kavadi signifies the shoulder pole with two baskets containing the offerings to Venkateswara; Manapati means singing in praise of Venkateswara; and Mendragutti means stitching a pair of shoes and presenting them to Venkateswara. These phratries are exogamous. Kavadi phratry is considered superior to Sathpadi while the other two are regarded inferior to Kavadi and Sathpadi.

### **Local Groups**

The Yerukala settlements comprise the local groups whose importance is next to that of the family. Each local group comprises all the families living in a common settlement and performs certain functions which the family alone cannot adequately perform.

The Yerukala settlements have been described at length. The local group i.e., the Yerukala settlement is relatively a permanent unit. Changes in its composition are rare. Families residing in one! Settlements are free to snap their connections with it and can migrate to another settlement at will. Yet, the migrations of this type are rare because of the attachment of the people to the local group. The members of a local group act as a community. They are bound together by their common locality and sense of belongingness to the locality.

It is common to find a tribal settlement exclusively inhabited by the members of one sub-tribe only. It is rare to find a tribal settlement exclusively inhabited by the members of one phratry and one clan only. In the Yerukala settlements of the three field-centres, the sub-tribe population embraces several clans and two phratries namely Kavadi and Sathpadi. However, In each settlement there is a tendency in people related to one another specially those related by blood to build their houses close to one another. That is to say that mostly those who belong to the same lineage build their dwellings close to one another. The tribal custom does not prohibit marriages within the same settlement.

The local group plays an important role in the social and economic life of the Yerukalas. Even though there is no definite system of rights and obligations which formally binds together the members of the local group, a close observation of its file and activities reveals that within this group it there is a great degree of economic and social co-operation. Much of this co- operation is voluntary, mutual and reciprocal in many economic matters like constructional their houses, cultivation of their fields, collection of wild produce in the neighboring forests and procuring the raw materials needed for making their craft goods individuals help one another. For collecting the wild produce, men and women go in groups of four or five. In social matters also, the basis of mutual and reciprocal help is distinctly discernible. When a woman is in her menses, a friendly woman from one of the neighboring houses will go to help her and cook for the family. During pregnancy and child-birth also women are helped by their neighbors. Assistance during periods of difficulties is looked upon as a moral duty by their tribal code of ethics. On the occasions of marriage, deaths and so on, the members of the local group, irrespective of their sub-tribe differences, readily co-operate with one another.



The local group has a significant role assigned to it in the general scheme of the social organization of the Yerukalas. By according social approval, the local group encourages its members. A Yerukala who demonstrates his or her skill in making baskets, in plaiting ropes, in preparing delicious dishes, in singing and dancing is sure to get appreciation, encouragement and recognition from the members of the local group. The local group expresses its disapproval and forces its recalcitrant members to act in conformity with the standards of tribal ethics. A son not giving proper attention to his aged parents, a quarrel some wife who neglects her household duties and young men and women who neglect the tribal standards of behaviour are sure to meet with the frowns of the elders of the local group. The local group has to keep an eye on the conduct of its members and report and penalize all breaches of laws, customs and traditions of the tribe. If the local group is negligent in the proper discharge of its duties, the larger tribal council may penalize the whole local group for its negligence. Thus, in the general scheme of the social organization of the Yerukalas, the local group has been assigned a very important place by the traditional standards of the tribe<sup>12</sup>.

In the Yerukala dialect, adoption is known as Dachu Aasukondu. When a person has no children he/she may adopt a child whether boy or girl naturally they prefer the son of his brother or one belonging to the same exogamous group. Yerukala kulapanchayat also permit the adoption of the children from other tribes like Waddar, Banjara etc. There is a small ceremony is observed for adoption of a child in this community by taking off the old Molatadu (waist band or — thread) of the boy or girl and tying a new waist band which is called as 'Molatadu Marchu,' followed by a dinner to the tribesmen. The duties of an adopt child are similar to that of a natural born child and he is the successor of the property of his adoptive parents. The mode of inheritance away the Yerukula is matrilineal. The property is equally divided among all the male children, primogeniture is not recognized among the Yerukula.

If a person had more than one wife, the property is equally shared between the wives's after the death of their husband. The children of the divorced wife are entitled to have share in the property of their deceased father because in Yerukala community even after divorce, the children live with the father. An adopted child ordinarily forfeits all claims of inheritance to the property of the original parents. A daughter's right to the ancestral property of her father is recognized when there is no male lineal descendant, nor a widow nor a mother of the deceased. Unmarried daughters were 'excluded from inheritance and they must be maintained out of the property of the deceased father. They are permitted to remain in possession of their father s property till their marriage.

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