

Environmental Impact on the Economic Life of Yerukala Tribe (A Case Study of Rayalaseema Region of Andhra Pradesh)

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Yerukala is one of the principal tribes in Andhra Pradesh, mostly inhabiting in and around the forest areas. They are semi-nomadic but are now gradually settling down. The Yerukala derive their name from the word Yeruka which means 'knowledge of prediction'. The females of this tribe are often considered as expert fortune tellers. The Yerukala speak a dialect called *Yerukala basha*, an admixture of several standard Dravidian languages.

The total population of Yerukala tribe according to 1981 census was 3,00,557, that constitutes 0.31% of the total population of Andhra Pradesh and 9.8% of the total population of the tribes in the state. Before they became plainsmen, the Yerukala were said to inhabit hill tracks and made a living by looting the plains' villagers. Their livelihood was reported to be from stealing, robbery and looting the villages though they had certain traditional occupations. Yerukala was once declared as a criminal tribe. Even now police keep a watch on them. The Government of India under the British rule, passed the Criminal Tribes Settlement Act of 1911 and included the Yerukala of Madras Province (which now included in Andhra Pradesh) under the category of nomadic tribes who wandered continuously and committed robberies wherever the opportunities are available.

The Yerukala are divided into four broad endogamous groups on the basis of their traditional occupations. They are Bidari (wandering merchants), Dabba (Bamboo stick workers), Uppu (Salt sellers) and Kunchi (Brush makers). The principle clans (*gotram*) among them are

Sathapadi, Manupadi, Nallabotula, Mendragutti and Kavadi. Their primary occupation is basket making and other allied products which chiefly depend on bamboo. They were once nomadic traders, now most of them have settled down at several places. Some of them practice agriculture; they also make mats, baskets of datepalam, ropes, twines and slings from fibre.

Rayalaseema is the southern region of Andhra Pradesh. It comprises the four revenue districts of Chittoor, Cuddapah, Anantapur and Kurnool. The region consists of people mostly residing in villages and maintaining rural character since agriculture and other allied occupations form the major means of subsistence. The principal tribes of this region are Yerukala, Chenchu, Sugali and Yanadi, of which most of them live in forests.

For the present study Ahobilam, a well known religious place, adjacent to Nallamala forests and valleys in Kurnool district is selected. The place is accessible by road from Allagadda, the taluk centre. Nallamala is one of the thickest forests in India. These hill ranges are in arid zone of Andhra Pradesh (viz. in erstwhile Kurnool district which since has been divided into Kurnool and Prakasam districts). The flora of the forest include redsanders, sandalwood, teak, wild grasses and bamboo. This forests are inhabited by several wild animals like cheta, tiger, bear and forest fox, wolf, etc., besides several types of birds. The forest is the main economic source to Yerukalas. Honey, tubers, nuts and various types of fruits and the edible products are collected by them.

Table 1: Tribal Population of Rayalaseema

S.No.	Tribe	Anantapur	Chittoor	Cuddapah	Kurnool	Total
1.	Yerukala	17,332	11,769	8,331	10,650	48,082
2.	Chenchu	9	2,056	214	2,651	4,930
3.	Sugali	43,346	15,515	7,874	12,778	79,512
4.	Yanadi	397	35,451	8,264	406	44,518

The total tribal population of Rayalaseema region is 1,83,813

Nallamala Forests

Andhra Pradesh is one of the largest states of India with about 64,000 sq.km. of forests of which Nallamalas occupy 5,161 sq.km. Situated as they are in the hill ranges of Nallamala, they present an exception to the general vegetation of an arid zone in having dense vegetarians comprising mostly dry deciduous forests with many patches of moist deciduous forests as at 'Mantralakanuma' pass in the north and 'Nandikanumma' pass in the south, interspersed with other locally distinct types like *Boswellia*-type, *Acacia*-type, *Hardwickia*-type, *Calamus*-type and *Phoenix*-type. Nallamala catchment with an area of 5525 sq.km. has 1,28,373 hectare of bamboo, is being tapped to feed paper mills. It comprises of the forests of Nallamalas spread over Kurnool and Prakasam, and to a small extent Cuddapah and Mahaboobnagar districts. The plants of Nallamalas show gigantism, perhaps due to fertility of soil and high waterable. The recurring forest fires to a large extent have slightly effected the forests of Nallamalas, as also the shifting tribals who have a nomadic life.

With the advent of the forestry section as the corporation called Andhra Pradesh Industrial Development Corporation Ltd., in December 1960 to promote industrial activities in the state, it has been estimated that upcoming industries like Sree Rayalaseema Paper Mills Ltd., which is situated in Nallamala catchment will consume to the tune of 60,000 tonnes of bamboos and 1,00,00 tonnes of hardwoods annually. For the purpose of planning, concentrated forest areas are called catchments. Catchment basin is the area from which a river or reservoir draws water supply and from which, therefore, it is fed, and Industrial Catchment is the area from which an industry draws its raw material happily. The Nallamalas catchment is one of the five recognised Industrial Catchments in Andhra Pradesh.

Social Set-up

The Yerukalas inhabiting Ahobilam (adjacent to Nallamala forests) have migrated to this place from various parts of Rayalaseema districts, as plenty of bamboo is available in the nearby forest for their traditional occupation (i.e., baasket-making) besides food-gathering. There

are 61 households of Yerukalas with a total population of 263, which comprises 136 males and 127 females. Most of the Yerukalas are illiterate. They eat rice, maize, wheat, millets and other cereals as their staple food. They worship their traditional female deities, namely, Nallamma, Sunkalamma, Poleramma, Peddamma, Konda Mangamma etc., besides male deities such as Balagurappa, Narasimhaswamy, Singaraiah, Thippaiah, Jwala Narasimhudu, Eswarudu, Maddileti, etc. All these deities have their abodes in various places in Nallamala forests. Annual fairs and festivals in honour of these deities take place, besides occasional worship in times of distress for remedy.

Among Yerukalas, marriages are contracted through negotiation, mutual consent, elopement in general. Monogamy is widely prevalent. Succession is through male line only. Divorce is permissible and remarriages are limited. There are altogether 30 kinship terms in the Yerukala kinship terminology. This is more than the world average of 27. Of the 30 terms, 27 are classificatory and 3 are denotative. Thus, their kinship terminology is primarily classificatory in nature.

Habitation

The habitation of Yerukala people is influenced mainly by three factors, viz., environment, degree of technology and functions of the abode. Environment plays a major role in determining the form and type of the house. Both the wild-grass or forest-grass (Kondagaddi) and bamboos has proved expedient material for creating up a hut. Bamboo is used for wall plating and forest-grass for roofing. Plantain leaves (*Aratiaku*) is also used for roofing. They function more soundly than any other available forest produce.

These materials can be manipulated more easily at every stage of hut construction. Moreover both are the most durable material available in the surroundings. The environment is totally dry and there is scarcity of water. The mud available there is not perfectly suitable for wall construction. Under these conditions bamboo and forest-grass or plantain leaves have proved an expedient materials for hut construction. Hence, the selection of these materials is absolutely an environmental choice and limitation. The Yerukala are primitive and simple at

their technique employed during hut construction. The primitive technology has influenced habitation problem and as much only a single hut resulted. Their dwellings are of three types such as round huts, rectangular huts and square type. Generally the size of the hut depends upon the number of the persons dwelling, status and economy. All the types of huts are small in relation to the number of persons dwelling.

Household Utensils and Implements

The amount of food material stored by the Yerukala is far less and as such there is a little equipment for storage. They are semi nomadic and it is very common among them to shift their families to some other villages due to occupational mobility. Now and then they take some seasonal camping at different places when there is no way of getting bamboos. As such elaborate households utensils are not expedient and the Yerukala are least interested. The household consists of earthenware and aluminium utensils, purchased from the nearby town Allagadda. However they make baskets out of bamboo for themselves.

Cooking and drinking utensils are made of either clay or aluminum. Gridning stones, pestles are made of the available stone material in the environment. Other household implements in use by Yerukala in the forest are knife, sickle, axe etc.

Economic Life

Yerukala is a wandering tribe connected with such occupations as basket making, stealing, begging and fortune telling. As noticed, majority of them live by basket making and rope making, while women can earn by for fortune-telling. Women of this tribe go about in villages carrying a basket made of palmyrah leaves attracting the children, by the toys prepared out of the palmyrah leaves. The very same women move about in the streets carrying the basket and calling *Yeruko amma Yeruka* (Prophecies, mother, prophecies). This kind of activity (locally known as gadde or sodi) provides them with small amounts which can be used for their daily expenses. It may be stated that the 'sodi women' often forms a convenient and interesting subject for adoption at fancy dress competitions.

Some Yerukalas have given up their nomadic

life and are found settled in villages. Even though they have settled life in some parts, a few do not seem to have given up the instinct to steal others' property and hence are being looked down upon even now.

Next, a majority of them depend on rural labour for their livelihood, of course, a few of them own dry land to small extent and produce jowar, maize, millets, horse-gram and groundnut. The cultivation mainly depends on the rainfall which often fails and disappoints them. Hence the income from agriculture is meagre. They are also found to live by 'rope-making', wattle making, goat and pig rearing, snake charming, fortune-telling and begging. A few of them have taken up government jobs. It has also been reported that some women of this tribe are expert in tattooing and earn their livelihood through this.

The Yerukala of Ahobilam are good at basketry, because they are professional experts in that sphere. Most of them are employed in the oriental art of basketry. Bamboo is the raw material available in plenty in Nallamala forest range. For basketry, the wrap and weft are generally broad and flat as a rule, there is little that can be done except to pass the strands alternatively over and under, producing a check or broad design. Some times narrow and think strands are employed making baskets.

It seems that basketry among these Yerukala folk would have started along with their efforts of constructing the dwellings. A cross-cultural survey and comparison can be given a proper idea about the history and origin of basketry among Yerukala tribe. They prepare baskets for their and market to meet their livelihood. The basketry includes various items such as 'gaddi gampa' (basket for carrying grass) 'tumpatikka' (a standard basket for measuring paddy etc.) 'Chapala butta' (fish basket), 'Chibbi' (a round flat tended oven disc-used for separation of the superfluous liquid of the cooked rice), 'mamidikaya butta' (mango basket), 'draksha butta' (Grape basket), 'Kolla gampa' (Hen basket), 'bandi dolla' (a hollow bamboo structure placed on the cart for transportation of manures, goods etc), and 'botta' or 'voda' (A store well for keeping grains).

In recent years, the people are slowly getting educated, though their economic progress

is painfully slow. It is a noteworthy feature that various governmental agencies such as IRDP, ITDA, DRDA are taking much interest in uplifting the tribe at least in certain aspects like providing housing facilities, milch cattle, subsidy loans for their profession, etc., which create an awareness and encouragement among the Yerukala to improve themselves further. A deviation is already noticed in their well habituated tendency of nomadic life. This tendency can be strengthened further if their household industries of basket making and rope making are given proper encouragement. The possibility of deriving substantial income in one place certainly makes them stick to one place and give up nomadic life.

KEY WORDS Environment. Tribe. Forest. Basket-making. Economy.

ABSTRACT The Tribal-ecosystem provides a best example of man-environment relationships. But in recent past these relations have come to stress and conflict because of many reasons that will be examined in this paper. Yerukala is one of the principal tribes of the Andhra Pradesh, mostly inhabiting in and around the forest areas of Nallamala forest region and range. They are in general semi-nomadic and gradually settling down. Yerukala tribe is a wandering tribe connected with such occupations such as Basket-making, stealing, begging and fortune-telling. The Yerukala are good at basketry and most of them are employed in that art. Bamboo is the raw material available in Nallamala forest region and other areas of Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh (comprising Chittoor, Cuddapah, Anantapur and Kurnool Districts) It seems that basketry among these Yerukala folk would have started along their efforts of constructing their dwellings.

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