

# Socio-Economic Changes of Yerukala Tribe In Andhra Pradesh

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## Abstract

India is the land of many tribal groups. Every tribal has inherited a unique history, language and culture from their ancestors. Yerukula is one among the principal tribes in Andhra Pradesh inhabiting in and around the forest areas. Yerukala, Erukala, Erukula or Kurru is a community found largely in the Southern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Yerukalas are indigenous people of South India. They call themselves 'Kurru'. They are called as 'Yerukula' in Andhra Pradesh after their women's traditional profession of fortune telling, Eruka cheputa. The Yerukula migrated all over the state but basically they are from Prakasam and Krishna districts of coastal Andhra Pradesh. The tribes are rearing the pigs and sell the pork. Some people depend on basket making and daily labouring while the women wander from village to village as fortune tellers and as tattooists. They speak a mongrel dialect, which appears to be a mixture of Tamil, Telugu and Konkani. Today, the Yerukalas are settled in the villages/towns and trying to make their way out of the poverty by getting education to obtain financial freedom which has been denied to them since ages. Yerukalas are using reservations and other benefits from the government of India. Yerukulas carry the social stigma of ex-criminal tribes and experience social exclusion. The present paper seeks to examine the changing trends of livelihoods among the yerukula tribe in Andhra Pradesh. The study reveals that yerukulas are not free from social exclusion. The low or non – existence of better levels of education, modern occupational skills are compelling them to experience social exclusion. This paper examines the changing socioeconomic conditions of the Yerukala community, a historically marginalized tribal group in Andhra Pradesh, India.

**Keywords:** Yerukula, social stigma, ex-criminal, livelihood and social change

## 1. Introduction

The name "Yerukala" comes from the traditional fortune-telling practice (*eruka chepputa*) performed by their women. While they possess their own Dravidian dialect (*Yerukala basha*), most have adapted to speaking Telugu. The Yerukala tribe in Andhra Pradesh has transitioned from a semi-nomadic, marginalized lifestyle—historically burdened by the colonial "criminal tribe" stigma—toward a settled agrarian and wage-labour existence. While modern education, welfare schemes, and shifting occupations have improved literacy and living standards, the community still encounters deep-seated poverty, social prejudice, and limited political clout. Yerukala is scheduled tribe found throughout Andhra Pradesh.

They call themselves 'Kurru'. They are called 'Yerukula' after their women's traditional profession of fortune telling ((Eruka chepputa).<sup>1</sup>

Yerukalas are using reservations and other benefits from the government of India. Yerukalas are divided into five categories on their functions, there are Dabba Yerukala, Uppu Yerukala, Kunchapuri Yerukala, Parikamuggula and Karivepaku Yerukalas. The Yerukala women are specialized in soothsaying and fortune telling. They also participate in economic activities like mat weaving and make baskets with wild date leaves. The sub-divisions are Dabba Yerukala (those who make baskets from split bamboo), Yeethapullala (Date twigs) 'Yerukula (those whom make baskets from wild date leaves), Kunchapuri Yerukala (those who make weaver's combs), Parikamuggula Yerukala (sooth sayers and beggars), Karivepaku Yerukala (hawkers of curry leaves) and Uppu Yerukala (salt hawkers).<sup>2</sup>

According to the 2011 Census, the total population of the Yerukula (and sub-groups like Koracha, Dabba, Kunchapuri, and Uppu Yerukula) in undivided Andhra Pradesh was approximately 406,000 to 519,000 (inclusive of regions that became Telangana). Official disaggregated, district-by-district exact headcounts for the Yerukula community alone are compiled inside the raw primary census data tables of the Census of India, but they are not published as a single generalized summary table. In Andhra Pradesh, where they have their largest population concentration, the Yerukala were classified as a 'Scheduled Tribe in 1956, making them eligible for various government welfare schemes and protections.<sup>3</sup>

## HISTORY

The Yerukula tribe actually has a very old history in India. They definitely lived in India for many, many years. As per historical records, they are old people who have been living in south India for thousands of years regarding their ancient heritage. We are seeing that they belong to Adivasi people only, who are tribal groups. Adivasi people are the original inhabitants of India itself, and they lived here long before any other communities came further into the region. Basically, they were staying in India before the same other groups came there.

Historically, the Yerukala maintained a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle, moving between villages to practice their trades. However, modernization, deforestation, and changing social norms have significantly impacted their traditional way of life over the past century. Many Yerukala have been forced to settle in permanent locations and seek alternative livelihoods.<sup>4</sup>

Yerukalas are indigenous people of South India. Yerukala people are a tribe found largely in the southern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Yerukala are an indigenous people which mean they have low status in modern India. They are called Yerukula after their women's traditional profession of fortune telling. This people have a language of its own, Yerukula. The Yerukala tribe has a dialect of its own which is called 'Yerukula basha' or 'Kurru basha' or 'Kulavatha'. It is derived from Dravidian languages, mostly Telugu, Tamil and Kannada. Traditionally, one and a half century ago, the Yerukalas were nomads. Their economic activities are basket making, rope making, mat weaving, fortune telling etc., but some of them engaged in snake charm, tattoo makers, musicians, acrobats, weaving brushes and sellers of salt, tamarind curry leaf and pulses, etc. moving from one

village to another. Apart from earning through their traditional occupations, in recent times, some of them are resorted to anti-social activities like robbery, decoitery and petty thefts. 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.<sup>5</sup>

## **GENERAL DISTRIBUTION PATTERNS**

The Yerukula migrated all over the state but basically they are from Prakasam and Krishna districts of coastal Andhra Pradesh. The Population of *Yerukula's* is 5,49,000 and has a literacy rate of 25.74%.<sup>6</sup>

### **Main Regions**

The yerukala tribe heavily concentrated in southern Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema regions including districts like Prakasam, Guntur, Nellore, Kurnool, Chittoor, Kadapa and Ananthapur.

### **Primary Concentration**

Most members of the Yerukala people reside across the southern Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema regions.

### **High Population Districts**

Substantial numbers live in districts such as Krishna, Guntur, Prakasam, Kurnool, and East Godavari, where they form a notable portion of the plains-residing Scheduled Tribe (ST) population (unlike hill tribes who concentrate in agency/scheduled tracts).

### **Urban vs. Rural**

A minor fraction resides in urban and semi-urban parts of coastal and southern districts, with smaller numbers present across neighbouring Telangana districts.<sup>7</sup>

## **OCCUPATION**

The traditional occupations of Yerukala include basket-making, mat weaving, raising pigs and chicken and rope-making. The Yerukala women are specialized in fortune telling and making charms. Today, most of the Yerukala are settled in villages or towns. They are trying to make their way out of poverty by getting an education. Even though they live in a democratic country like India, they are still living under harsh social conditions because of the Hindu caste system. The traditional occupations of Yerukalas include basket-making, mat weaving, pig rearing, rope-making etc. The Yerukala women are specialized in sooth saying and fortune telling. Some of them also participate in economic activities like basket making, mat weaving etc, and make baskets with wild date leaves.

## **SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGES OF YERUKALA TRIBE**

The Yerukala, a Scheduled Tribe in Andhra Pradesh, have transitioned from a nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyle plagued by British-era criminal stigmata (such as in Stuartpuram) toward settled village life, formal education, and modern livelihoods, though they still encounter persistent socioeconomic hurdles and social exclusion.<sup>8</sup>

### **Social and Educational Changes**

#### **Rising literacy**

Literacy rates have slowly improved from historical lows, aided by state-run residential schools and hostel facilities for tribal children. There is significant improvement in literacy rates among the Yerukala over time, with particularly rapid progress since 1991. By 2011, the community's literacy rate had surpassed the average for all Scheduled Tribes in the state. However, a substantial gap remains compared to the general population. Gender disparities in education persist, though they have narrowed over time. In 2011, the literacy rate for Yerukala males was 62.4% compared to 43.1% for females.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Persistence of customs**

Patriarchal structures, traditional caste councils (*Kula Panchayat*), and preferential cross-cousin or uncle-niece marriages persist alongside wider adoption of Hindu and Christian practices.

#### **Social stigma**

Remnants of historical criminal branding continue to cause subtle social discrimination in rural mainstream settings.

### **Political and Developmental Challenges**

#### **Limited representation**

While constitutional reservations guarantee local body presence, true political decision-making power remains restricted by economic vulnerability and low higher-level representation.

#### **High dropout rates**

Economic pressures often force children to drop out early to support family incomes.

#### **Targeted welfare need**

Academic and socioeconomic evaluations (such as studies from research organizations like the Centre for Economic and Social Studies) emphasize that stronger credit access, upgraded skill training, and effective asset distribution are still required for holistic community upliftment.

## **Shift From Traditional Livelihoods**

### **Abandoning Nomadism**

Families moved from wandering tents and temporary camps to permanent housing colonies and regular villages.

### **Occupational Diversification**

Traditional trades like basket-making (*Dabba Yerukala*), mat-weaving (*Eetha Yerukala*), rope-making, and fortune-telling have gradually given way to wage labour, agriculture, and government jobs.

### **Breaking the Stigma**

Social reform movements and activist interventions (notably in regions like Stuartpuram) helped members shed historical criminal tags, producing academics, professionals, and public figures.<sup>10</sup>

## **Social and Cultural Evolution**

### **Education and Literacy**

Rising literacy rates (approaching roughly 48% and growing across younger generations) have driven greater awareness of legal rights and political participation. Children of the employees their families got the opportunity to secure qualitative education which opened doors for them to migrate to metropolitan cities with much better job opportunities across the world. The Tribal welfare Department of Government of Andhra Pradesh initiated several schemes to improve the overall development of the tribals, with special efforts made to implant reservations for tribal development,<sup>11</sup>

### **Family and Marriage Patterns**

While traditional preferences for patriarchal nuclear families, cross-cousin marriages, and uncle-niece unions remain common in rural settings, formal legal age norms and modern values slowly influence younger cohorts.

### **Religious Assimilation**

Traditional animistic elements have blended more deeply with mainstream Hindu deity worship (such as Venkateswara and Narasimha) and regional village festivals.<sup>12</sup>

## **Economic Shifts**

### **Traditional crafts to wage labour**

Bamboo basket-making, rope-making, and pig rearing remain vital, but deforestation and plastic substitutes have forced many into daily-wage agricultural and urban labour.

### **Settlement and land ownership**

Families have largely abandoned wandering lifestyles to live in permanent colonies or village edges, though absolute landlessness or marginal land holdings remain high.<sup>13</sup>

### **Diversification**

A small fraction of the younger generation has secured modern private or government employment through Scheduled Tribe (ST) reservation benefits.<sup>14</sup>

### **CHALLENGES**

Today, the Yerukalas are settled in the villages/towns and trying to make their way out of the poverty by getting education to obtain financial freedom which has been denied to them since ages.

### **Social Discrimination**

Despite constitutional safeguards, deep-seated caste-class hierarchies in rural Andhra Pradesh still subject community members to everyday marginalization.

### **Economic Vulnerability**

Many families remain landless or poor, depending heavily on seasonal or informal work, which limits rapid upward mobility. They face daily social and economic discrimination.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

1. They also need to learn new job skills and good local schools for their children.
2. Improper management of schemes and inefficient implementation of suitable programmes in the tribal region create a major problem.
3. The majority of the tribal people are not even aware of the development schemes implemented by government agencies.
4. Without creating awareness among the tribal people, it is difficult to achieve better results.

### **CONCLUSION**

The social structure which the Yerukala built up in the past is rapidly moulded by the demands of the new situation. The sub-divisions of Yerukula include those who make baskets from split bamboo, those who make items from wild date leaves, those who make weaver's combs and sellers of curry leaves and salt, Yerukala, Erukala, Erukula or Kurru is a community found largely in the Southern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. They call themselves 'Kurru'. They are called as 'Yerukula' in Andhra Pradesh after their women's traditional profession of fortune telling, Eruka cheputa. The tribes are rearing the pigs and sell the pork. Some people depend on basket making and daily labouring while

the women wander from village to village as fortune tellers and as tattooists. 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 is not being found these days. Since independence, the government has initiated several programmes, policies and laws and has made efforts for gradual socio-economic development of Scheduled Tribes, but they still remain the weakest sections of the society, there has been a considerable increase in the fund allocation for the tribal areas. But most of these tribals were not able to draw benefits from the facilities provided by government. There have been people, who have used education and government jobs to rise through the difficult social hierarchies,

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