

The State of Andhra Pradesh Forest Tribes

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Tribals form a considerable segment of population of the state of Andhra Pradesh. As per the census of 1971, the total tribal population of Andhra Pradesh is 1,657,657 which constitute approximately 3.81 per cent of the total population of the state¹. These tribes live mostly in forest hills and in some isolated regions of the plains. They do not have puccahouses, and vast majority of them live in huts, thatched with straw and forest leaves. Most of the tribals are nomads and wander from place to place aimlessly and endlessly in search of food. They were unjustly dubbed by the British Indian administrators as criminal tribes. They were closely watched and severely persecuted on mere suspicion of indulging in robberies etc.

These tribals make out their livelihood by following their age –old avocations like snake – charming, performing acrobatic feats, selling herbs and drugs, fortune telling, singing and entertaining the villagers by their performances with the help of bullocks, monkeys and other animals. For months together many of the tribals leave their forests and wander in the plains. The tribals are strangers to agriculture. Hence they are not employed even as agricultural labourers by the peasants of plains. But some tribals are engaged in shifting cultivation known as “podu” in Andhra Pradesh. In order to supplement the meager minor forest produce like honey, wax, herbs, roots etc. while the Agency tribals, i.e.,

Religion

The tribal religion is a jumble of faith, dominated by the baser form of the Hindu religion consisting animism. Totemism and ancestor worship. The religious activities of the tribals includes the magical rites, omens, etc. The village head man and his council adjudge criminal and civil disputes, decide breaches if clan rulers and settle marital disputes. Monogamy, Polygamy, divorce, remarriage are practiced by the tribal people. Marriages by capture, elopement and mutual consent are in vogue among tribals. Among tribes, like the Yanadis and chenchus the marriage tie (known as ‘Thali’ in Telugu) is seldom tied as it has no sacramental value or significance to them. Those belonging to East Godavari, Visakhapatnam and Srikakulam districts are poducultivatore, the Chenchus of Nallamala Mountain ranges are pure food gatherers and hunters of small game. They are experts in bamboo work and in collecting cliff as well as tree honey.

Most of the tribals speak Telugu as their mother tongue. The Gonds and Thotis of Adilabad speak Gondi, the Kolams speak Kolami language.

The tribal people, particularly the Koyas, KondaReddis and Savaras of Andhra Pradesh were well-known for their revolts. In the past, they paid bitterly with their blood for openly ventilating their just grievance during the rule of the East India Company. The Rampa Rebellion of Rambhupati in 1802-1803 and the Rekapalli Revolt of 1879, under the leadership of Chandrayya of Bhupathi, Ambul Reddy of Boduluru, are two notable examples of the tribal unrest in Andhra in the 19th century. In the 20th century, the tribal region of the East Godavari and Visakhapatnam districts witnessed a great revolt known as the Rampa rebellion. This revolt lasted for more than two years from August 1922 to 7th May 1924 under the able leadership of Sri AlluriSeetharamaRaju.

The important tribes of Andhra Pradesh are:

1. Chenchus, 2. Yanadis, 3. Yerukalas, 4. Kondareddis, 5. Konda Kapu, 6. Konda Dora, 7. Koya, 8. ReddiDoras, 9. Gadaba, 10. Sugalis or Lambadis, 11. Manna Dora, 12. Andh, 13. Kolam, 14. Valmikis, 15. Nayakas, 16. gond, etc., Besides, there are a number of unclassified Tribes.

Chenchus

Chenchus are an aboriginal tribe and the perhaps the oldest inhabitants of the Nallamalas of the Kurnool district and Amarabad plateau in Mahabubnagar district. They are also found in a few places in Chittoor district. Legend traces their origin to God Narasimha of Ahobilam in Kurnool District, who it is believed married a Chenchus girl. The Muslim chronicle Ferista makes a reference of the chenchus, when he passed through the Kurnool District in 1694.

The ancestors of Chenchus owned no houses but roamed the jungle living under trees and rock shelters. Later, the Chenchus cleared the forests to built houses of bamboos and thatch them with grass. But they did not completely abandon their nomadic habits. The Chenchus generally go out in the morning without having food and return in the evening after covering many miles, having eaten nothing but a few roasted roots. The staple food of Chenchus consists of cereals, roots and tubers, forest fruits etc. They boil the tubers, which looks like sweet potatoes. The tubers like 'Yerravalagadda', 'Chenchugadda', 'Urregadda', 'Nilugadda' are the routine food of Chenchus. They also take 'Devadara' leaves, 'Boddiaku', 'Doggalaku', 'Chenchalaku', 'Pendlipeddikura', 'Mallakura', 'Atikamamidikura' and 'Pullakura'. Besides, they hunt the animals like hares, lizards, peacocks, squirrels bear, crow, etc., throughout the year with the help of bow and arrows and take their meat as food.

The main occupations of Chenchus are hunting, baskets making and honey collection. They are not adept in cultivation. This does not mean they are not industrious. They can work hard if they wish. They love the life of ease since money has no attraction for them. Their value of time and money are very primitive and simple. To sum up, Chenchus are a lovable people whose number is unfortunately dwindling and they are one of the vanishing tribes of India.

Yanadis

Yanadis are one of the earliest races of the Indian peninsula. They are found mostly in Nellore, Cuddapah and Kurnool districts and around sacred Tirupati Hills of Chittoor District. Yanadis are the largest tribal group in Chittoor District. They are very primitive in their habits. The Yanadis tongue is a tribal dialect similar to Kannada, Telugu and Tamil in construction.

They live entirely in jungles by making low Conical huts with the help of bamboo and palmyra leaves and grass. The hut affords protection from Sun and rain. But they generally cook, eat and sleep outside their huts.

The Yanadis know the forest flora and fauna. They collect minor forest products like firewood, roots, barks, honey, 'Neredu', 'Kanuga', 'Tangedu', Soap-nut, Tamarind etc., and sell them in Villages and towns. Their staple food includes the meet of the animals like Sambar deer, wild goat, bear, land tortoise, hare, bandicoot, jerboa rat, mongoose, fish etc., and some forest roots and fruits.

The Yanadis earn their livelihood by working as Watchman, agricultural labourers and domestic servants. Taking advantage of the ignorance of the Yanadis the people of the plains exploit them by paying low wages. There are two types of Yanadilabourers viz., (1) "Government Yanadis", i.e, those who are employed by the Forest Department, and (2) the privately employed Yanadis. Even the 'Government Yanadis' who work under the forest management are paid meager wages.

Yanadis are experts in catching snakes including King Cobras, though snake charming is not their profession. As the demand for snake skins for making various leather articles such as belts, straps, etc., is extensive, they are encouraged to catch snakes and sell their skins for two to three rupees each. Hunt is also their most favorable activity.

Yanadis, being nomads for thousands of years have no ambition, no revenge, no jealousy, and no collective communal feeling. Their places of worship are not temples but houses, called 'Devaraindlu' (houses Poleramma or Ankamma is in-charge of the local area. Subbarayudu, venkateswarlu, pancha, narasimbulu and other are the Gods of the Yanadis.

Yerukulas

The Yerukulas are a nomadic tribe found chiefly in the districts of Guntur, Kurnool, Cuddapah, Anantapur, Nellore and Chittoor. They speak Yerukula, a Polyglot dialect. There are three main sub-divisions among Yerukulas. They are (1) 'Uru' (Village) Yerukulas, (2) 'Uppu' Yerukulas and (3) 'Dabha' Yerukulas. The 'Uru' Yerukulas settled down in the villages by giving up their wandering habits. The 'Uppu' Yerukulas sell salt and other commodities while moving from place to place. The 'Dabha' Yerukulas make baskets from split bamboos. These people reside near the foot hills.

The Yerukulas are good basket makers. They cut bamboos in the forests and make baskets and sell them in the villages. They also cut firewood in the jungle and sell it in towns. They prepare ropes and 'Utlu' (suspended rope receptacles for keeping pots, etc.). They also gather and sell green 'Kerivepaku', used in cooking. They built semi-circular portable bamboo huts with low mud walls and bent poles covered with mats. They eat game flesh of all sorts and jungle roots. Their wealth included the cattle, donkeys, and pigs.

The Yerukula women wander in the villages in the guise of fortune-tellers and beggars and mark the houses fit for burglary. The male members commit burglary at nights in the houses so marked. Even while

walking them make ropes, fishing nets and baskets. Unlike other tribal people, the Yerukulas have no dances, no music, no songs, no games and folk-lore to entertain themselves.

Lambadis (Sugalis)

The Lambadis also known as Banjaras or Sugalis are one of the major tribes of Tribes of Andhra Pradesh. They are found mostly in Telangana and Rayalaseema districts. They constitute the chief immigrant tribe in Chittoor District and have settled down particularly in Punganur and Palamanertaluks. They speak Lambadi into a number of Tandas each with a headman after whom the Tanda is named.

Lambadis are wanderers in forests. They live by selling firewood and also by engaging themselves as labourers. They are good cow-herds and excellent breeders of bull. They bring thousands of cattle to the forests during summer for grazing and remain there for 3 to 4 months. The forest department collect small fee from them for grazing. As the forest regulations are complicated and forest reservations are restrictive, the traditional professions of the Lambadis are gradually declining and some of them have settled down in villages as cultivators.

KondaReddis

Another hill tribe known as KondaReddis is found South of the Godavari River both sides of Papikonda range. The KondaReddis migrate periodically from the Godavari for felling teak timber and floating it in the perennial big water way for use in Coastal district. They are supposed to be trading in timber for the Vijayanagar and other rulers of Deccan⁵. Ultimately they have settled down along the Papikonda range of River Godavari. They collect yams, tubers and other edible roots by digging the earth with a sharpened digging stick. They also gather honey and shoot small game, collect several vegetable edible herbs, nuts, fruits for cooking purpose. They draw palm wine from the palm tree and drink it. They also practice shifting cultivation known as 'Podu'.

Koyas

The Koyas are yet another primitive tribe live in the Agency area of Visakhapatnam and Srikakulam districts. They are not found in the Cuddapah district. The Koyas live in the thatched houses, which are built in a circular or a rectangular fashion. Their chief occupation is agriculture and Forest labour. They practice extensive 'Podu' cultivation and bit of wet cultivation. They generally feed on gruel and roots and barks of some trees. The gruel consumed by these people, is made out of tamarind seed powder. It is very injurious to health. They eat wild-lizards, flesh of rabbits, deer, wild bear and buffalow meat. Generally, they take meat on festive occasions and ceremonies. However, they never eat the flesh of birds and even some families do not touch goats. They use honey comb as a side dish along with drink. The Koyas around Bhadrachalam collect edible and medicinal herbs and sell them in villages and towns.

A section of the Koyas known as 'Raja Koyas' generally live in plains. They do hoe-cultivation. As the produce from their lands is insufficient, they eat roots and fruits. Generally, they eat the roots known as 'Tellachamagadda', 'Nallachemagadda', 'Vellaregadda', 'Damergadda', 'Ali gadda', 'Dumpagadda', etc., Rice is rare food to them and served only at the times of feasts. They also eat fish, fowl and flesh of animals.

IRULAS

The irulas are another jungle tribe who resemble the Yanadis. Some irulas are staple food is roots, fruits and honey. Some irulas are herbalists and are believed to have the power of curing some diseases, snake-poisoning and bites of rates and insects. They collect leaves of the banyam tree and make them food plates. The tribals, now known as "Girijans", children of the hills are as much the wealth of the forests as flora and fauna. It is only when the tribals are properly taken care of by the government and people of the plains; the forests develop and bring prosperity to the nation.

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