



A STUDY OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OF THE YERUKALA TRIBE

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ABSTRACT:

The Yerukala tribe of the Andhra region worships a diverse range of gods and goddesses. This paper explores the religious practices of Yerukalas. From worshipping nature to animals, they developed many religious practices. Among the *kuladevatas* they worship are YellammaTalli, PolimerammaTalli, PoluRaju and Pothu Raju. They respect cow as a sacred animal and as a valuable asset. They also worship their ancestors. Being a member of the Yerukala community, I had the opportunity to learn about and practice some of the religious rituals, and document them for future research related to the Yerukala community.

Keywords: Yerukala, Erukula, Primitive Tribes, Andhra, Kuladevatas, Ancestor Worship

INTRODUCTION:

In its narrow sense, religion can be defined as a human experience of what is considered to be the divine. But in a broader sense it is that experience which considers as ultimate and the unconditioned and as the criterion of one's life—beit an ideology, a doctrine a person etc. It is the nature of religion to accept, believe, and submit surrender to any thing called or believed to be the divine. Man's recognition of his frailty, weakness, limitations, finitude, constitutes the matrix of religious consciousness. Religion believes in the efficacy and powerfulness of supernatural and miraculous forces, god or goddess, faith, temples priests and prophets, and community of believers. Sacred books are supposed to contain the words of god/gods, worship, rites, ceremonies,

communication, and propagation? There can be three types of Religions, viz; Natural, Historical and Mystical.

Natural religions are patterned on the natural phenomena or the laws of the nature. Here nature constitutes the paradigm of the religious reality. Such religions operate within the domain of determinism, exchangeability and repetition. Not only nature is viewed as divine but also all the religious ideas, the nature and personality of gods are heavily drawn from nature only. Nature is the domain and manifestation of the divine. Any religion that arises from this matrix is called natural religion. Historical religions on the other hand consist in the contesting the naturalistic character of person. A person or a group of persons who claim to have been divinely inspired act as the founders of these historical religions. Mystical religions are individualistic in their nature. Only the mystic knows these experiences. They are normally incommunicable. The Yerukala tribe of the Andhra region, predominantly settled in Guntur and Nellore districts, worships a diverse range of gods and goddesses. This paper explores the religious practices of Yerukalas.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OF YERUKALAS:

As far as the religious traditions of Yerukalas of Andhra region is concerned, they do not have a particular god or goddess. Unlike the *Ekshwakas* and *Rastrakutas*, they do not observe the *kuladaiva*, a particular god inherited from ancestors, as traditional asset. From time immemorial, these people pray and offer their pujas to Hindu gods with noticeable distinctions. *Gotras* do their respective works. At the time of *Devatarchana* and *Abhisheka*, the ritual of cleaning and bathing the image of gods is done by *KavadiGotram* sect, and for that they carry the water and offerings. Sects other than *KavadiGotram* are not allowed to carry water to the temple. *Kavadi* literally means a water-carrying tool made up of bamboo. Floral decoration and garlanding is done by *SathupadiGotram*, *Mendraguthi* sects carry ornamental and jewellery decorations. Finally, praising the god in the form of singing and dancing is generally looked after by *ManupadiGotram*. So, the *Gotram* institution specifies the works to be carried while performing rituals, but not the deity to pray.

According to the various headmen of various regions, the deity in possession do vary with from place to place. And there are no traces of a single deity in particular. V.Lalitha in her book "The Making of Criminal Tribes" stated that the tradition of sewing chappals for the goddess by *Mendragutti Gotram* was prevalent in many temples including Tirupathi Venkateswaraswamy temple.

1 Prakruti Worshiping of Yerukalas:

Yerukalas used to worship *prakruthi* (nature) like Aryans from the ancient times. The sun, moon, *vayu* (air), *agni* (fire) and some trees are important among the natural deities worshiped by Yerukalas. Sun worshiping is still in practice even in recent times in particular areas. Performing "suryanamaskara" at the dawn is observed in some areas. According to the headmen of *Kandukuru*, *Kanigiri* and *Avulavari Palli* villages of Prakasam District in Andhra, *suryanamaskara* is a routine tradition in daily life of Yerukalas.

Apart from the sun, moon has got its own importance in their worship. Though the worshipping of moon is not traceable, the new moon day of every month is observed as a good omen for starting any new programs and watching the moon on new moon day is considered to be good for the forthcoming life. Yerukalas also worship *vayudeva* (God of Air).

As they dwell near forests and in villages, they depend heavily on rainfall. In drought conditions, they worship *vanadeva* (God of Forest). The way in which they worship *vanadeva* is a unique one. To worship *vanadeva* for rains, they hang up a big frog to a stick. They tie up some neem leaves around the frog and carry it to each and every house in the village. At each house, one pot water is poured to make the frog croak. As per their belief, the listening to the croak *vayudeva* pours down the rains.

They also worship trees. Neem, and *jammi* (*Prosopis cineraria*) tree are important among the trees. They do not cut down *jammi* tree if they find it. They call it as *Devidichetti* (the tree of God). During festival season, Yerukalas clean the trunk of that tree at the base level, apply turmeric, put saffron bindies (huge dots in round shape), lit up essence stick, and finally offer coconut by breaking it. In the same way, they name the neem trees after *Ankalammachettu*,

Mahalakshammachettu and the list goes on like that. They worship these trees daily.

2 Animistic Deities Worshipping:

After worshipping nature for a long time, Yerukalas turned to animals. Snake, cow, *nandi* (ox) are the prominent animals worshipped by them. After worshipping *pamuputta* (habitat of snakes), they offer milk to the snakes. *Nagulachavathi* (snake festival) is an important festival and many of the Yerukalas bear the names like Nagaiah, Nagamani, Nagendra, Nagamma, and Naga Raju. These people worship *Nagupamu* (king cobra).

In the same way, they also worship cows. At the time of festivals, they clean the cows and apply turmeric and saffron bindies to its foreheads. Sweet *pongal* is offered to cows as prasada (food offering to gods). For Yerukalas, cow is a sacred animal and a valuable asset.

3 Gods and Goddesses:

Apart from worshipping nature and animals, they also worship various *kuladevatas*. In these *kuladevatas*, some are gods while others are goddesses.

Female Deities (goddesses):

- i. *PolerammaTalli*: Poleramma means the goddess who stays in the limits of a particular village. The main reason behind worshipping this goddess is that she is responsible for preventing contagious diseases from entering into the village. May be because of this reason, Poleramma temples are found at the outskirts of the villages.
- ii. *MutyammaTalli*: Mutanuma is the goddess of the wealth. Only women of the Yerukalas are allowed to worship Muthyalamma. In the worship process, they clean a stone, put saffron bindies, and place Muthyaladandalu (chain of pearls) on the stone in a particular order.
- iii. *AnkammaTalli*: Yerukalas are the main worshippers of Ankamma. At the time of *jathara* or *thirunallu* (fairs), it is quite popular. In the place where they find big Neem tree, they construct *Arugu* around that tree. At the base of the tree, they construct small

temple like structure without any image of god. Worshippers apply turmeric and saffron to the stem of that tree at the base level, lit essence sticks and break coconuts in offer. Some of them do *abisheka* even with milk also.

- iv. *YellammaTalli*: Yellamma deity is quite popular of the female deities among Yerukalas. Many of the Yerukalas are known as *Yellamma* worshippers. *Yellamma jatharas* are also very popular in the region. In their worship, they take bronze plate and beat it up with *surakathi* (sharp knives). In the Jatharas, both males and females take part and consume toddy of palm tree and alcohol. They dance in trance. In the same way they worship *Nancharamma*.
- v. *GangammaTalli*: Yerukalas worship Gangamma for water needs, monsoon and greenery. Yerukalas worship *Gangamma* Paruchurivaripalem of Prakasam district where a temple is located on top of the Polurajuhill. In May of every year, Ganga Jathara is observed. People from various parts of Andhra Pradesh visit this temple during jathara to fulfil ritual vows and offerings.
- vi. *KollapurammaTalli*: In Marella Seemaarea, *Kollapuramma* is a famous deity. Sode (fortune telling) starts with *sodekatte* (fortune teller) asking *Kollapuramma Talli* to help her in fortune telling. It clearly indicates the importance of *KollapurammaTalli* in Yerukalas religion. During festival, Yerukalas fulfil the vows to *Kollapuramma*.
- vii. *NukalammaTalli*: *Nukalamma* is worshipped with special importance. It is believed that in ancient times Yerukalas were depressed economically and were not in a position to purchase rice to fulfil their needs. Instead of rice, they used to take the broken form of rice. Yerukalas particularly worship *NukalammaTalli* to bless them daily with at least broken rice. In other words, she is the deity of food.

In addition, there are some more female deities that are worshipped. They are:KanakammaTalli, SunkalammaTalli, MaremmaTalli, MahalakshammaTalli, and NancharammaTalli.

Male Deities (gods):

Among the male deities of Yerukalas, PoluRajuand PothuRaju are more popular. These deities are well-known as *mokkubadi* (vows) deities and the deities who protect from evils and very helping in the needs. Yerukalas possess *pasusampada* (herd) in large number and they vow a healthy sheep as an offer to the deity incase the deity blesses them with good crops. In expectation of well-being of the tribe, Yerukalas promise to offer male sheep (he goat) and set it free on the name of PoluRaju or Pothu Raju. And sacrifice the same after grown enough. The temples of PoluRaju and Pothu Raju deities are normally seen on the top of the hills. Yerukalas climb up the hills along with kith and kin to reach the temple and sacrifice the offered he-goat. They cook the meat of sacrificed goat or sheep and consume liquor by singing and dancing in trance.

Moreover, PenchalaiahSwamy is a common male deity for the Yerukalas and Yanadis of bordering areas of Prakasham and Nellore districts. Yerukalas and Yenadis name their offspring after Penchalaiah Swami like Penchalaiah and Penchamma in Udayagiri and Atmakur areas.PenchalaiahSwami temples are often situated on top of the hills. In the yearlyjathara, other people along with Yerukalas and Yanadis reach the top of the hills to worship the PenchalaiahSwami and submit their offerings.

4 Ancestor Worshipping:

The activities of ancestors in the tribal community find an important place in their religious beliefs. They recognize that man's power is restricted. Through ancestor worship, they acquire powers of a far-reaching and compulsive kind. They believe in the existence of ancestors and their interest and intervention in the worldly affairs. Dube (1970) and Vidyarthi (1944-61) consider "ancestor worship as an important aspect of the tribal religion. Since the tribes firmly believe in the idea that spirits of the dead ancestors have power to decide their destiny, they are very cautious in performing the rites and observe all the ceremonies carefully" (*The Tribal* 245).The newly dead person is believed to have

joined the earlier dead ancestors. The spirits of ancestors are called and worshipped annually, occasionally or when one affords. The tribes believe that unless the spirit of the newly dead ancestor is worshipped, it continues to exist and appears in dreams. It always harasses its relatives to expedite the preparation for worship, mortuary sacrifice and feast.

5 Fulfilling Vows of Headmen of Yerukalas:

Yerukalas sacrifice a pig to fulfil vows of the headmen. To scarify a pig, they dress it and take some *Varu* (skin of the pig) from neck to make pork scratchings, put them in a bowl to offer as an oblation to the deity, and then chant a prayer in chorus. After the prayer, they cut the pork into pieces and throw four pieces towards the four directions and cook the remaining pork to celebrate the occasion. The above prayer is normally chanted during festivals and vow fulfilling time.

CONCLUSION:

The Yerukalas of the Andhra region are distinct in many respects including in their religious practices. They worship a diverse range of gods and goddesses, apart from nature, animals and ancestors. Notable among their deities are YellammaTalli, PolimerammaTalli, PoluRaju, PothuRaju and others. They respect cow as a sacred animal and as a valuable asset. They not only domesticate pigs, but also offer it as sacrifice to gods or fulfil their vow. They respect their elders, and worship them after they pass away.

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