

Resilience and Tradition: Socio-Historical and Cultural Practices of the Yerukala Community in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Yerukala (Korava/Korama/Korra) community of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, with particular focus on their socio-historical positioning, cultural practices, and linguistic traditions. Historically marginalized under colonial rule, the community was designated as a “criminal tribe” through the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which imposed stigma, segregation, and coercive reform through settlements such as Stuartpuram. Post-independence efforts at de-notification and rehabilitation reveal shifting approaches from the religiously guided programmes of the Salvation Army to the humanist, community-based interventions of organizations like the Atheist Centre and Samskar.

Beyond these historical processes, the paper highlights the vibrant cultural and linguistic heritage of the Yerukala, documented through their folk songs, agricultural rituals, games, symbolic arts, and gendered traditional occupations. Special attention is given to Sode Chepputa (fortune-telling), the community’s most distinctive practice, traditionally reserved for women. Examined as both a livelihood and a form of ritual authority, sode encapsulates the intersection of economy, spirituality, and cultural identity. While deeply embedded in sacred belief systems and linked to divine origins, the practice has seen erosion in credibility due to modernization and external appropriation.

Through a synthesis of socio-historical analysis and ethnographic description, the study underscores the need to view denotified and tribal communities not solely through frames of stigma and marginalization but as carriers of complex cultural systems with deep linguistic, ritual, and social significance. At the same time, it calls attention to the historical lesson that socially inclusive, democratic, and humanist interventions offer greater scope for integration and empowerment than coercive or paternalistic models of reform.

Keywords: Yerukala, Denotified Tribes (DNTs), Criminal Tribes Act (1871), Sode Chepputa (Fortune-telling)

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, tribal communities in India lived in relative isolation, with little interaction with the populations of the plains. This detachment kept them outside the reach of state-led development initiatives and insulated them from external influences. The onset of British colonial rule marked a turning point, as the forests-long secure homelands of these groups-were reframed primarily as resources for exploitation. Colonial penetration disrupted indigenous ways of life and sought to impose rigid systems of administration and control.

A significant instrument of this control was the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, through which several tribes were officially branded as “criminal by birth.” Special settlements were created to isolate and “reform” them. Administration of these settlements was divided between government authorities and voluntary agencies such as the Salvation Army, Anjuman Islamia, and Arya Samaj, with settlements classified as agricultural, industrial, reformatory, or penal. These interventions were less about rehabilitation than about social discipline and the reorganization of tribal life to suit colonial interests. “In light of this historical background and cultural context, the present study has been undertaken with specific objectives to document, analyse, and interpret the socio-cultural practices of Yerukala community.”

Objectives

1. To trace the historical experience of the Yerukala community, particularly their stigmatization under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 and subsequent efforts at reform and rehabilitation.
2. To document and analyze the cultural and traditional practices of the Yerukala, with special emphasis on Sode Chepputa (fortune-telling) as a defining occupation and cultural symbol.
3. To examine the gendered dimensions of economic and ritual practices, highlighting women's role as both cultural custodians and economic actors.
4. To situate the Yerukala language and cultural practices within the broader framework of comparative Dravidian studies.
5. To assess the role of colonial institutions, voluntary organizations, and post-independence reform movements in shaping the trajectory of the community.

To achieve these objectives, the study adopts a qualitative and multidisciplinary methodological approach, as outlined below.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, historical-anthropological research approach to explore the socio-cultural and linguistic practices of the Yerukala community. The methodology integrates multiple sources and methods to provide a comprehensive understanding. First, a detailed review of historical records and colonial legislation, particularly focusing on the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, forms the basis for tracing the community's socio-political marginalization and reform settlement histories such as Stuartpuram. Secondly, existing linguistic studies on Yerukala and Korava speech varieties are analyzed comparatively to situate their language within the broader Dravidian linguistic family.

Ethnographic data is gathered through oral narratives, folk songs, ritual descriptions, and symbolic cultural practices, documenting traditional occupations, festivals, and unique customs such as Sode Chepputa (fortune-telling). Gendered dimensions are considered by examining women's roles in ritual and economic activities, highlighting their agency within the community. Secondary sources including published ethnographies and NGO reports supplement these observations. This multidimensional approach allows for a nuanced analysis of historical continuity, cultural resilience, and the impacts of colonial and post-colonial state interventions on the Yerukala community.

The Yerukala Tribe

Among the many tribal groups of South India, the Korava, Korama, Koracha, Koraga, and Korra occupy a prominent place. Of these, the Korava, Korama, and Korra are generally classified under the broader Yerukula tribe. In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, they are commonly referred to as Yerukula, while linguistic studies suggest that the Yerukula and Korava share largely similar language practices. Available linguistic research, however, disproportionately focuses on the Yerukulas of Andhra Pradesh, neglecting systematic study of the Korava community in Karnataka, which has maintained strong ties with Kannada language and culture for centuries.

Earlier scholarship described Korava speech as a hybrid form of Tamil, whereas more recent studies categorize it as a dialect of Telugu. Within the Korava, micro-divisions such as the Ura-Korra and Kunchi-Korra reflect geographical settlement patterns. While broad commonalities exist between the Korava and Yerukula, a detailed comparative analysis of their speech varieties is still required. Such work would not only clarify distinct community identities but would also contribute to the broader field of comparative Dravidian linguistics.

Background in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana

The presence of the Yerukala in Andhra Pradesh has been historically documented, with Thurston noting their early settlement in the northern parts of Cuddapah district. In the local Telugu context, they are often called Erakavaru or Erukalavaru, a designation derived from their role as traditional fortune-tellers. Despite long-standing cultural ties and strong community cohesion, their labeling as a "criminal tribe" during colonial rule has cast a long shadow on their social status.

Both the Yerukala and Kathera were classified as ex-criminal tribes in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, and widely stigmatized as dacoits, burglars, pilferers, thieves, and railway wagon breakers. As part of colonial strategies of social control, the Stuartpuram settlement was established in 1914 as an agricultural colony under the management of the Salvation Army. The organization's reform programmes extended to agriculture, education, healthcare, and vocational training, and it was even granted judicial powers. Yet, its overall approach remained deeply religious in orientation, which limited its effectiveness as a genuine instrument of social change. The Salvation Army remained active for nearly four decades before responsibility was transferred to the Tribal Welfare Department after independence, although it continues to play a religio-social role even today.

A second significant reform initiative came in 1974, led by secular and humanist activists from the Atheist Centre in Vijayawada. This marked a crucial shift in approach: reform was no longer framed in purely religious or paternalistic terms, but recognized as a multidimensional process. Criminal reformation, they argued, requires the involvement of three actors—first, the individuals themselves; second, the state machinery including police and administrators; and third, and most critically, surrounding society. Of these, community acceptance or rejection often determines whether reform is sustained. In Stuartpuram, the NGO Samskar represented this societal dimension, employing a “Three-Generation Approach” (3G Approach) implemented in five structured phases. The emphasis was on long-term integration and area development, showing that sustainable reformation requires the creation of enabling environments across generations.

The Stuartpuram experiment demonstrates a vital historical lesson: reforms anchored in coercive or religiously paternalistic methods had limited success in addressing entrenched marginalization. By contrast, humanist, democratic, and community-driven interventions created meaningful space for reintegration and transformation, offering a more sustainable pathway for overcoming the stigma and structural disadvantages imposed on denotified tribes (DNTs).

Cultural and Traditional Practices of the Yerukala

The cultural traditions of the Yerukala community, particularly in the districts of Guntur and Nellore, are marked by rich artistic expressions and collective participation. These practices are most vividly observed during festivals, marriage ceremonies, moonlit gatherings, and on occasions when petharlu (ritual performances) are conducted.

Music occupies a central role in Yerukala daily and ritual life. Women, in particular, sing while working in the fields as a way of easing fatigue and creating a shared rhythm of labour. Distinct songs are performed at different stages of agricultural activity—planting, harvesting, and at the threshing floor when the crops are processed. There is also a tradition of early morning songs performed by husband and wife together while pounding grains, symbolizing both cooperation and marital harmony.

An important feature of Yerukala culture is the equal participation of men and women in artistic and cultural practices. Instrumental music also holds significance, with community members in Warangal, Khammam, Nalgonda, and Nizamabad districts crafting flutes out of tender bamboo shoots and using them in performances. Alongside these artistic expressions, the community has preserved traditional games such as pulizoodam, a strategic board game that bears resemblance to modern chess.

This research discusses and documents such cultural practices, highlighting their role not only in entertainment and artistic expression but also in reinforcing social bonds, preserving collective memory, and maintaining a distinctive cultural identity within the broader South Indian context.

Traditional Practices

The traditional occupations of the Yerukala community reflect a division of labour shaped by both cultural heritage and economic necessity. Among men, basket weaving and pig rearing have historically been the dominant livelihoods, providing essential goods for the local market and reinforcing their identity as a service-oriented community.

Women, however, play an equally crucial role, not merely as supporters but as independent economic actors whose skills sustain household incomes and cultural continuity. Their primary occupations include:

- Sode Chepputa (fortune-telling): practiced in markets, villages, and festive gatherings, where women serve as cultural intermediaries, blending spiritual guidance with economic exchange.
- Pachcha Podavadam (tattooing): traditionally carrying ritual meaning and serving as a visual marker of identity, tattoos often embody protective, aesthetic, or status-related functions within Yerukala society.
- Muggulu Veyadam (soil designs): decorative motifs inscribed at thresholds and communal spaces, which serve both artistic and ritual purposes, symbolizing prosperity, fertility, and social belonging.

Through these practices, Yerukala women not only contribute substantially to the household economy but also preserve traditions that embed meaning into daily life. Their roles highlight the intersection of economy and culture, where income generation is inseparable from the maintenance of symbolic and ritual life. Importantly, this challenges narrow interpretations of labour as purely gendered: although men’s occupations appear more material and utilitarian, women’s activities carry equal weight in shaping both household resilience and cultural identity.

Sode Chepputa (Fortune-Telling)

Fortune-telling, locally known as sode chepputa, constitutes the most distinctive cultural and occupational feature of the Yerukala community, to the extent that the community itself derives its identity from this practice. The word sode (also called gadde) refers to a specialized system of divination that occupies a unique position within the broader field of South Indian astrology. While astrology traditionally encompasses diverse forms such as sankhya

sastramu (numerology), prasna sastramu (horoscopy), hastha samudrikamu (palmistry), puttumachchala sastramu (mole analysis), and sakuna sastramu (omens)-the sode system of the Yerukala has acquired a distinct cultural significance. Similar practices are observed among other tribal groups, such as the Yanadi, who call it Rangam.

Sode-telling is an occupation restricted exclusively to women. A practicing fortune-teller is known as Yerukalasanani in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, and as Kuruvanji in Karnataka. Yerukalasanani are identified by their distinctive attire and ritual implements: a bright sari, hair tied in a tuft, and a saffron mark on the forehead, evoking the image of the gramadevatha (village goddess). Their presence is also announced through their rhythmic chant: “Sodemma... sode... sode chebutanu... sode” (“I will tell your fortune”). The tools of their profession include a palm-leaf basket, a kollapuri (a palm-sized cloth pouch made of gunny bag), cowries smeared with turmeric and saffron, a mantra dandam (ritual stick), and the sode burra. Nursing mothers often carry their children tied securely within the folds of their sari while conducting this work.

The remuneration for fortune-telling is traditionally not monetary but paid in grains. Payments are graded into three types based on measure: mudu solala gadde (three measures), aidu solala gadde (five measures), and yedu solala gadde (seven measures). A fortune-telling session is conducted in a melodious, often dramatic tone, with the Yerukalasanani’s loquacious style enhancing her appeal to clients. Typically, individuals approach her during illness, misfortune, loss of valuables, or unexplained suffering, seeking causes and remedies.

The art of sode is marked by ritual technique and devotional expression. The fortune-teller invokes the names of multiple gods and goddesses, entering into a trance-like state in which she speaks as though possessed by divine power. She interprets problems and prescribes remedies, thereby offering both counsel and ritual solutions. Some practitioners use numerical methods, such as counting grains picked from a winnowing basket, to derive predictions. Beyond spiritual authority, the Yerukalasanani occupies an important socio-economic role. She is often the primary breadwinner of her family, enjoying a degree of mobility and restricted autonomy. While she is expected to return home by evening, long-distance journeys are undertaken only with trusted companions, sometimes staying overnight at known households when travel facilities are unavailable.

Ritual Initiation

Entry into the profession follows an elaborate initiation ritual, usually conducted shortly after a girl’s first menstruation. The ceremony takes place on a Sunday, in the presence of extended kin who are invited to a feast. The initiate, however, fasts until the conclusion of the ritual. Blindfolded, she is then made to consume a mixture of boiled rice, green gram, black hen, black pig, black goat, and fresh blood. Successfully eating at least three mouthfuls without vomiting is considered proof of her suitability for the role of sode gathe (fortune-teller).

Sacred Origins and Beliefs

Community lore locates the origins of sode in divine gift. According to legend, the goddess Parvathi Devi granted this sacred art to the Yerukala (Koracha) community after testing a man’s skill in craftsmanship. Along with the art of fortune-telling, she presented ritual tools such as the mantra dandam and the chata (winnowing basket), which has later been substituted by the kollapuri. Because the practice is considered a divine gift, sode is regarded as a sacred responsibility, requiring practitioners to maintain chastity, devotion, and moral integrity.

Yerukalasanani are expected to observe fasting (vokka poddu) on certain days, and once annually they pay homage to their deity believed to have conferred vaksiddi (the power of speech or prophecy). Worship of Shakti thus forms an integral part of their ritual practices. Traditionally, their utterances were said to be truthful, with their speech believed to carry divine authority.

Contemporary Decline

In recent decades, the sanctity and credibility of sode has been eroded by the entry of individuals perceived as inauthentic practitioners, leading to a decline in its social and ritual significance. Where once it was understood as a sacred and divinely sanctioned practice, the art of fortune-telling is increasingly viewed with suspicion and as vulnerable to exploitation.

CONCLUSION

The study of the Yerukala community illustrates the layered interplay between history, culture, and social reform in the lives of denotified tribes. Colonial policies, particularly the Criminal Tribes Act, transformed communities with distinct cultural practices into stigmatized populations, whose traditions and livelihoods were recast through the lens of criminality. Settlements such as Stuartpuram reveal both the limitations of religiously motivated reform under colonialism and the possibilities opened by later humanist and community-driven models of re-integration.

Equally significant is the recognition of the Yerukala as active bearers of cultural identity rather than passive subjects of reform. From everyday practices such as agricultural songs and decorative arts to specialized traditions like tattooing and fortune-telling, the community continues to sustain cultural systems that interweave economic survival, social cohesion, and ritual symbolism. The institution of Sode Chepputa, in particular, demonstrates a striking case of women's cultural agency, where livelihood intersects with sacred authority. Its gradual decline, however, reflects the tensions between tradition, modernity, and the pressures of social stigma.

Ultimately, the Yerukala experience underscores a broader principle: the trajectories of tribal and denotified communities cannot be understood solely through histories of marginalization but must also be interpreted through the resilience of their cultural practices. Genuine reform and empowerment arise not from coercion or imposed models of "civilization" but from inclusive, democratic approaches that respect cultural heritage while addressing structural inequities. Such a perspective not only restores dignity to historically stigmatized groups but also enriches the broader understanding of India's diverse social fabric.

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