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**Culture contact and the emerging political organisation :
A case of the Yerukula**

JAKKA PARTHASARATHY



ANTHROPOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
27, Jawaharlal Nehru Road
Calcutta-700 016

Culture contact and the emerging political organization— a case of the Yerukula

JAKKA PARTHASARATHY*

Discussions dealing with culture contact and social change are currently in vogue in anthropological literature. Every process has a beginning, a middle and an end which provide a helpful way of organising some insights concerning modes of culture change. Murphy (1968 : 215) observes that "people alter their organization of social relations to adjust to the presence of surrounding and neighbouring groups". This is just another way of saying that strains in a social system call for new adjustments. The beginning of social change as Etzioni (1964 : 403) notes "is to a large degree a response to the presence of some degree of social disorganization, caused either internally or externally". Dube (1967 : 34) feels that it is "essentially a process—a movement from traditional or quasi-traditional order to certain desired types of technology and associated forms of social structure, value orientations and motivations and norms". Thus, the impact of culture contact refers to an accultured phenomenon which comprehends changes set in motion by the coming together of societies with different cultural traditions. This paper seeks to explain the process of culture contact and the emerging political structure of the Yerukula, a Scheduled Tribe in Andhra Pradesh and to understand them in the context of surrounding and neighbouring communities.

The Yerukula

The Yerukula are one of the largest tribes of Andhra Pradesh numbering 1,62,560 (1971 census). They are also found sparsely in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu states. According to 1971 census, the Yerukula who are classified as a Scheduled Tribe in eleven districts of Andhra Pradesh form 0.31% of the total population of Andhra Pradesh and 9.81% of the total Scheduled Tribe population of the state. It is noticed that 86.53 percent of the Yerukula population live in rural areas, while 13.46% are in urban areas.

The Yerukula were once a nomadic population and like many other nomadic groups they are also gradually settling down. They are known

*Anthropological Survey of India, Southern Regional Office, Mysore.

by several names like Korcha, Korava, Kaikadi, etc. They derive their name from 'yeruka' which means 'knowledge or acquaintance'. The females of the tribe profess to be experts in fortune-telling. They speak a dialect called 'yerkali basha', which appears to be a mixture of several Dravidian speeches. The common belief is that the Yerukula are congenial thieves. They were once labelled as ex-criminal tribes. I have discussed this issue elsewhere (Parthasarathy : 1982). Aiyappan (1981 : 28), writing about the beggary in India, described the Yerukula of Andhra Pradesh as hereditary begging caste. They are divided into three large endogamous groups on the basis of their traditional occupations. They are Bidari Yerukula (collectors of forest produce), Dabba Yerukula (basket makers) and Kunche Yerukula (fortune-tellers). They have multifarious economic pursuits. The Bidari Yerukula's primary occupation now is trading. They mostly trade in rock salt, tamarind, curry leaf and pulses. Some of them have taken to agriculture. Besides agriculture and trade, they also make mats and baskets of datepalm, ropes and twines from forest fibres and slings for hanging utensils. The present study is mainly concerned with Bidari Yerukula.

Area of Study

The present paper is based on the data collected from the village Kalagalla of Anantapur district in Andhra Pradesh in the years 1977 and 1979. The village Kalagalla is situated in the north-east corner of Anantapur taluk adjoining Gooty taluk at 14° 43' north latitude and 77° 26' east longitude. It lies at a distance of 27 kilometers north-east of Anantapur town on the Kudevu-Penakacherla metalled road. There is a bus from Anantapur town to Kalagalla village which passes via Kuderu.

The total area of the village is 14.30 sq. miles. It is a multi-caste village where the Yerukula are living along with other caste groups. Before 1960, the Yerukula were living separately along with their fellow-men at a distance of 2 kms. from this village. But during the year 1960 the Block Development authorities constructed concrete houses within this village for the Yerukulas who then shifted to this village and started to live along with other castes. At present most of the households of the Kapu (peasants) and Kuruba (shepherds) castes occupy the centre of the habitat. The households of the Ekila (peasants), Ediga (toddy tappers), Boya (hunters) and Vodda (stone cutters) castes are on the northern side of the main street. Surrounding the Boya and Vodda households are the households of Sale (weavers), Marati (tailors) and

Chakalai (washer men). The households of Madiga (*harijans*) are situated separately in the western corner. The households of the Bidari Yerukula occupy the complete northern side of the main street opposite to Kapu and a Brahmin household and their locality is known as 'koracha gevi'. Adjacent to the Yerukula are 3 households of the Sugalties (Lambani tribe). The Bidari Yerukula population in this village according to the author's census is 277 with 141 males and 136 females residing in 45 households.

Political Organization

The dominant feature of the Yerukula political organization is its *Kulapanchayat*. In Kalagalla village the Yerukula have their own *Kulapanchayat*. The members of the *Kulapanchayat* are usually elders who are called *Peddamonushulu*, meaning elders, and the head of the Yerukula settlement is called the *Berumonusha*, meaning big man. Apparently the *Berumonusha* is selected on the basis of seniority in age, intelligence, and influence which a person commands over others by virtue of his love towards the community as a whole and ability to solve problems. The *Berumonusha* should be between 35 and 55 years of age and when he crosses the age of 55 years he ceases to be the *Berumonusha* though he may continue to command some influence on the *Kulapanchayat*. On the basis of the qualities mentioned above the *Berumonusha* chooses the best man from among the available people as his successor. The *Berumonusha* presides over all consultations and is given the honorable position at all social functions.

The *Berumonusha* with other elders decides disputes on the basis of the merits of each case. Cases of the following nature are taken up for arbitration in the *Kulapanchayat*: disputes relating to sex, disputes regarding property and loans, disputes regarding land, quarrels between the individuals on family matters and disputes regarding criminal activities such as sharing of stolen goods, etc. The Yerukula usually do not like their disputes to be discussed and decided by other castes and hence they try to settle all their disputes among themselves particularly disputes regarding criminal activities.¹

1. Biswas (1960) also mentioned similar functions of the *panchayat* of ex-criminal tribes in Delhi State. Simhadri (1974) also recorded that as the Yerukulas do thieving and other deviant activities, they naturally hesitate to refer their activities and disputes arising out of them to the people of other castes.

Justice by Ordeals

In the Yerukula community, when facts are not available to identify the guilty person in spite of several adjournments in a particular case, then they try to determine the guilty through ordeals, like both the parties dipping their fingers in the boiling oil or lifting a red-hot crow-bar, carrying water-filled pot on palms without dropping a drop of water and walking through fire-bed, in the presence of the *Berumonusha* and the elders gathered for the purpose. The Yerukula believe that the ordeals would decide the righteousness or otherwise of a person in a dispute. The alleged culprit is expected to go through the ordeals without any pain or discomfort if he is innocent. The fundamental belief of the Yerukulas behind these ordeals is that the devine power will protect the innocent and punish the guilty.

Ex-Communication

Apart from solving disputes, the *Kulapanchayat* of the Yerukulas is also responsible for the maintenance of social order in the community, as per the norms of their society. If a Yerukula fails to fulfil the norms of the society he is suitably reprimanded and if the violation is serious he may be ex-communicated from the community by the *Kulapanchayat*. According to their customary law the Yerukula men are not allowed to marry a woman of any other caste or community lower than that of their own. For instance, the Yerukula cannot marry or elope with a woman of Muslim, Mangali (barber), Chakali (washermen), Mala and Madiga (Scheduled Castes) communities. If a Yerukula does so, he will be ex-communicated by the *Kulapanchayat*. Inter-dining or even serving water to the ex-communicated is disallowed and considered to be polluting till the person is re-admitted into the community by the *Kulapanchayat*. The ex-communicated person can be re-admitted only after he admits that he is guilty and he has also to take an oath in front of *Berumonusha* that in future he will not indulge in such activities. For re-admission the ex-communicated man must undergo purificatory ceremonies.

To draw the attention specifically on their functioning of political system before they shifted to Kalagalla village in 1960, let me present a few cases, settled in their *Kulapanchayat*. Elsewhere I have discussed more cases elaborately (Parthasarathy : 1979).

Case 1

Any sexual intercourse between the members of the same clan is considered to be a social stigma. In the Yerukula community, an alliance between the Intiperu (family name) of Pabburay and Munga cannot be established either by legal or illegal means, because both these Intiperu come under the same clan *i.e.*, Kavadi clan. Therefore they consider themselves as one family and the members should look upon each other as brothers and sisters.

Two persons B & D belonging to the Kavadi clan had extra-marital relationship. The husband 'C' of the girl reported the matter to the *Kulapanchayat* which found them guilty and ex-communicated both of them. People of the community in the settlement and neighbouring villages were informed of the decision taken by the *Kulapanchayat* and warned not to entertain B & D in any way. They had no other way but to accept food from a Mala house, who are considered inferior to Yerukula. As both B & D were unable to bear these hardships, they returned to the village and begged for mercy. The *Kulapanchayat* was convened and it was decided to re-admit them after ritual purification.

Case 2

In the Yerukula settlement, 'H' had kept Rs. 120 in his house before leaving for agricultural work with his family. When they returned in the evening he found that the amount was missing. This matter was reported to the *Berumonusha* and he also told him that he suspected his neighbour 'I' for the theft. The *Kulapanchayat* was convened and there the *Berumonusha* announced that whosoever has taken the amount should throw the same in front of Ramaswamy temple without the Knowledge of others, during the night time. Next day the *Berumonusha* did not find the amount inside the temple. Then the *Berumonusha* decided to find the guilty through an ordeal of dipping the fingers in the boiling oil. All the community members along with 'I' were called. On the appointed day all the members of the settlement participated in the ordeal function. In front of their elders the people, including the women and children, dipped their fingers in the boiling oil one by one. But they were not hurt. When 'I's turn came for dipping his fingers, he refused to dip and at last he accepted his guilt. Immediately he was asked by the *Kulapanchayat* to return the amount along with a fine of Rs. 50 and also the expenditure of the ordeal function. He carried out the orders of the *Kulapanchayat*.

Culture contact and emerging trends: Role of village Panchayat

As said earlier, before 1960, the Yerukula were living separately with their kinsmen and fellow Yerukulas in a settlement at a distance of 2 kms. from Kalagalla village. During the year 1960, all the Yerukula of this settlement shifted to specially built houses in Kalagalla. Then onwards, they came close to other caste groups within the purview of the village territory. Now the Yerukula are part of the wider social, political, economic and legal system. Of these, the legal system of the State Government is of great significance for our purpose here. The state does not give any separate recognition to the customary law of the Yerukula which means that if any law of the state is violated by the Yerukulas though sanctioned by their custom the state law will prevail. Legally this restricts the activities of the *Kulapanchayat* to residual matters. In practice the *Kulapanchayat* can exercise its authority in default of it being not challenged. It will be of some interest to indicate the official machinery that exists for village administration which is a potential source of conflict and challenge to the Yerukula political and legal system.

In Kalagalla village, there is a statutory *panchayat*. The village *panchayat* allotted one seat to the Yerukula population under the category of reservation to Scheduled Tribes. At present in this statutory *panchayat*, a Yerukula man is elected as one of the members. As members of the *panchayat*, they frequently come in contact with the officials of the government and political leaders. They are supposed to have multiple roles. It is expected of them to help the government in implementing development plans and also in running the village administration. As representatives of the political parties they are supposed to mobilise political opinion in favour of the political parties they work for. Because of their contacts at different levels people also look towards them for some favour. This way they have some influence on the people. Recently, among the Yerukula of Kalagalla village a conflict arose between the elected member of the village *panchayat* and the *Berumonusha* of *Kulapanchayat*. The *Peddamonushulu* of the *Kulapanchayat* have immense power and influence within the community. But the Yerukula youth, who, influenced with the activities of other dominant caste groups, are looking beyond the community and their cultural norms, now tend to support their elected member of the village *panchayat*. Here is the classical example of conflict between the traditional leadership which signifies the solidarity of the Yerukula based on primordial ties, and

the modern leadership which appears to be based on egalitarian principles. The anatomy of conflict between the two can be highly complex. However, in the acculturative processes to which the Yerukula are subjected, new cultural type of relations are emerging in Yerukula population. The resultant culture type is similar to that of the local culture core of the surrounding caste groups. The following cases indicate the stress which are developing in the Yerukula society as a result of these processes.

In Kalagalla village 'J' is having extra-marital relationship with his brother's wife. This is known to most of the Yerukula, but nobody has reported this to the *Kulapanchayat*, because 'J' is a member of the village statutory *panchayat* and also a popular man among the village *panchayat* members.

In the village, the elected village *panchayat* member of the community is against 'Berumonusha'. This faction raised its head during 1977 Parliamentary Elections. *Berumonusha* had advised the Yerukula men to vote for the Congress candidate, but the elected *panchayat* member pressed the Yerukula youth to vote for Janatha Party. This created a breach in the society. Loyalties were divided and altercation took place between the members of the two groups in the village.

At present in Kalagalla village, the Yerukula completely stopped their age-old practice of 'justice by ordeals' due to the interference of the village elders of the dominant castes. The other caste people think that conducting ordeals is against the law of state. The village Munsif of Kalagalla who belongs to 'Reddy' community is also against the practice of ordeals. He had reported to the police whenever he suspected an ordeal was going to be practised by the Yerukula. For instance in the year 1967 the *Berumonusha* of the *Kulapanchayat* decided to find out the guilt of a woman 'K' by asking her to touch a red hot crow-bar. But at that time the village Munsif intervened in the case and reported the matter to the police. The police rushed to the village and stopped the ordeal by threatening them that if they did so they all would be arrested and prosecuted. The *Berumonusha* withdrew the case immediately and that case has never been settled. In this village no ordeal has been practised since then. This case study should also help clarify the heuristic concept of social change which is, to a large extent, a response to the presence of some degree of political disorganization, caused either internally or externally.

Conclusion

The data on the whole, lend support to the assumption that the culture contact may lead, to some extent the people to alter their political organization to adjust to the presence of surrounding and neighbouring groups. This is just another way of saying that strains in a political system call for new adjustments. Further, the interpretation herein presented has been that there is a conflict between the traditional leadership which signifies the solidarity of the Yerukula based on primordial ties, and the modern leadership which appear to be based on egalitarian principles. However, in the acculturative processes to which the Yerukula are subjected, new cultural type of relations are emerging. The resultant culture type is similar to that of the local culture core of the surrounding caste groups. It is found that the concept of social change is a response to the presence of some degree of political or social disorganization, caused due to culture contact.

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