

Ethnohistory, Ethnography, and Cultural Aspects of the Tribes in the Rampachodavaram Agency Division, Andhra Pradesh, India

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the ethnohistoric and historiographic information available on various aspects of the culture and society of the tribes of the Rampachodavaram Agency Division. A total of seven tribal communities inhabit this division: Konda Kammara, Konda Dora, Konda Kapu, Konda Reddi, Koya, Valmiki, and Parange Porja. The study focuses on the ethnohistory and socio-cultural mobility of these tribes in the Rampachodavaram Agency Division. The fragmented accounts of tribal ethnohistory provided by anthropologists and historians over the past century do not adequately address several issues, particularly the historical affinities of the tribes and the multiplicity of designations for a single tribe across different regions. The contributions of both tribal and non-tribal groups to the cultural dynamics of the division highlight a long process of socio-cultural homogenization in the Rampachodavaram Agency Division, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Keywords: Australoid, Rampachodavaram Agency Division, Eastern Ghats, Tribes

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1. INTRODUCTION

All the tribes declared as “primitive” require special developmental efforts in addition to the regular programs earmarked for tribal communities (Thurston, 1909). After India’s Independence, a few anthropologists from the Tribal Cultural Research Institute, Government of Andhra Pradesh, wrote about the tribes; however, most of their works focused on both ethnography and culture change (Rao, Mohan K., 1993). Even those who wrote during the British period primarily dealt with the ethnographic aspects of the tribes (Hutton, 1946; Aiyappan, 1948; Benson & Janet, 1976). It is important to note that a large portion of the field data collected has been utilized in preparing this report on the tribes. Wherever necessary, the data has been presented within a historical perspective, citing sources from both the pre-British and post-British periods. The Rampachodavaram Agency Division is home to a variety of Scheduled Tribes (STs) who have inhabited the forested and hilly regions of the Eastern Ghats for generations (Rao, V.L.N. & Ramana, G.V., 2007). These tribes are recognized for their unique cultural practices, traditional knowledge systems, and reliance on forest resources for their livelihoods (Simhadri, 1991; Sudhakar Reddy, 1995). Most of the tribes reside in small hamlets locally known as pentas. They depend on subsistence agriculture, forest product collection, and manual labour. Traditional medicine, local deities, and oral storytelling are central to their cultural fabric (Anil & Mishra, 2003; Roy & Sharma, 2005). The tribes possess deep ecological knowledge and often maintain a harmonious relationship with their forest environment. The region falls under the jurisdiction of the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA), Rampachodavaram, which implements welfare schemes related to education, healthcare, livelihoods, and land rights. Current efforts aim to strike a balance between.

developmental initiatives and the preservation of tribal identity

2. DISTRIBUTION

The **Koya's** form a sizeable tribal population in the Rampachodavaram Agency Division of Andhra Pradesh. They are said to belong to the great Gond family (Murthy, 1981). Their language is a dialect of Gondi, though most of them also speak Telugu. Some Koya's living in parts of East Godavari have forgotten their own dialect, Koya (Basha), and adopted Telugu as their mother tongue. It is also called Chettu Basha ("Tree language") or Gali Basha ("Air language") in Telugu, as it is spoken by people living under the trees and in forests.

The **Konda Doras** are found in the Rampachodavaram Agency Division. They primarily speak Telugu as their mother tongue but can also speak Adivasi Oriya.

The Hill or **Konda Reddis** inhabit the triangular region between the Godavari River and the Rampachodavaram Agency Division, and their main language is Telugu.

The **Konda Kapus** are chiefly found in the hill tracts of the Rampachodavaram Agency Division. Their mother tongue, Telugu, is a mixed or "corrupt" form of Oriya.

The **Konda Kammaras**, traditionally blacksmiths, are settled in the Agency areas of the Rampachodavaram Agency Division. They are also known as Konda Kammara and Ojas. They speak a mixed form of Telugu and Oriya.

The **Valmiki's** are concentrated in the Agency areas of the Rampachodavaram Agency Division. They claim descent from the famous sage Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana. Their spoken language is a mixed form of Telugu and Oriya. Literacy among the Valmiki's is comparatively higher than among other Agency tribes.

The **Parange Porjas** are mostly found in the Agency areas of the Rampachodavaram Agency Division of Andhra Pradesh. Very few of them are literate. The term Porja is said to be derived from the Sanskrit word Praja, meaning "subjects" or "people." Recognized as a Primitive Tribal Group, the Porjas are agriculturists who also practice podu (shifting) cultivation on hill slopes. They have their own dialect and also speak Telugu as well as Adivasi Oriya.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

The Rampachodavaram Agency Division is located between 17°17'30" – 17°48'05" N latitude and 81°44'26" – 82°13'10" E longitude (Fig. 1), covering an area of 6,431.63 sq. km. Approximately 66% of this area (4,260.97 sq. km.) is under forest cover, characterized by high species diversity and receiving heavy rainfall from the northeast monsoon during June–December, with an average annual rainfall of 208.2 mm. The Rampachodavaram Agency Division is home to seven major ethnic communities: Konda Reddy, Konda Kapu, Konda Dora, Konda Kammara, Koya, Valmiki, and Parange Porja, with a total population of over 3.5 lakhs (Census 2011). Among these, the Konda Reddys and Koyas are the predominant tribes, inhabiting mostly the hilly regions and foothills. The Koyas, who are said to belong to the great Gond family, live in very small but picturesque villages (Furer-Haimendorf, 1979). Their chief occupation is traditional podu cultivation. The Konda Doras also practice podu cultivation, and levirate marriage is a customary practice among them. The Konda Reddis are primarily shifting cultivators who depend largely on the forest flora and fauna for their livelihood; their agriculture represents a crude form of cultivation (Misra, 2005; Reddy & Sunitha, 2005). The Konda Kapus are mostly cultivators who domesticate fowls, cows, and buffaloes. Some of them, particularly those living near the hill areas, also practice podu cultivation. The Konda Kammaras, traditionally blacksmiths settled in the Agency area, manufacture agricultural implements required by the tribes, and also engage in black smithy and carpentry; however, many have now given up their traditional occupation. The Valmiki's claim descent from the famous sage Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana. They are mainly agriculturists and forest labourers, though some have become traders and petty moneylenders. The Parange Porjas are agriculturists who also practice podu cultivation on hill slopes. The people rely heavily on their natural surroundings, collecting a wide variety of food items, medicines, and household resources from the forests. They maintain a close association with local plant resources and possess considerable knowledge regarding their uses, propagation, and conservation. Traditional herbal medicine plays a vital role in their healthcare systems, with local practitioners providing remedies for a wide range of diseases (Rao & Sujatha, 1998; Rajpramukh & Palkumar, 2006; Rajpramukh, 2012). Each tribe has its own herbal medical practitioners who serve as custodians of indigenous health traditions (Rao, Krishan & Prasad, 1995).

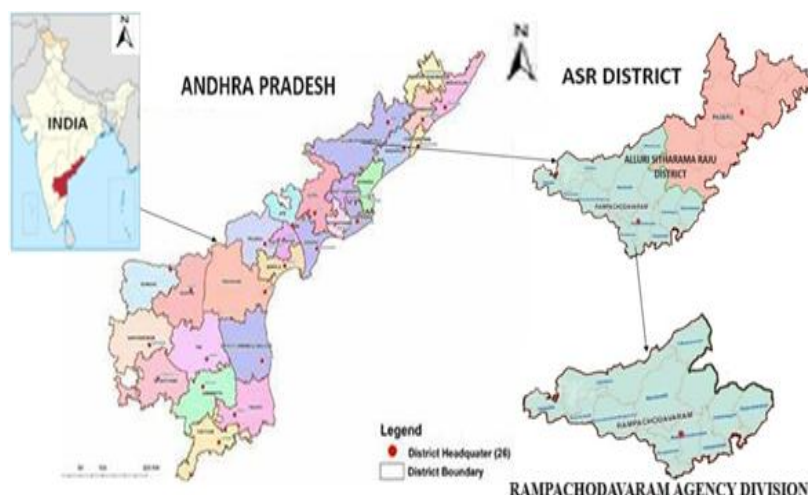


Fig.1. Location map of the Rampachodavaram Agency Division, ASR District, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Ethnobotanical Investigations

Data Collection

The study is based on repeated ethnobotanical surveys conducted across different localities of the Rampachodavaram Agency Division during 2022–2025. A total of 11 mandals and 55 villages (five from each mandal) surrounding the forest were covered through several field trips. Formal and informal interviews were conducted with 275 households, and prior informed consent was obtained from local healers, village chiefs, elders, housewives, and other knowledgeable individuals. Data were collected using various ethnographic techniques, including in-depth interviews with key informants in the community (such as village heads and leaders), informal unstructured discussions, and participant observation. Interviews were conducted in the local language, Telugu, to facilitate effective communication and ensure accurate data collection. The interview protocols followed the guidelines outlined in the International Society of Ethnobiology's Code of Ethics for ethnobiological research (International Society of Ethnobiology, 2006). Standard guidelines for ethnographic data collection were followed (Pelto & Pelto, 1978). All fieldwork was carried out within the 11 mandals: Rampachodavaram, Devipatnam, Y. Ramavaram, Addateegala, Gangavaram, Mareduhilli, Rajavommangi, Nellipaka, Chintoor, Kunavaram, and Vararamachandrapuram of the Rampachodavaram Agency Division (administrative block) in ASR District, Andhra Pradesh.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social Status in Society

The social status of the tribes is comparatively low when compared to the caste populations living in the study villages. These tribal communities reside alongside the caste populations.

Social and Political Organization

The tribes follow a patriarchal social structure, with the father serving as the head of the family. Sons inherit the surname, while daughters retain the father's lineage until marriage. Many villages are multi-ethnic and have their own separate union (kula panchayat), which consists of a president and other office bearers. This union is responsible for resolving internal disputes as well as conflicts with other groups in the village (Dash, 2009). It also engages in negotiations with government officials regarding various welfare programs for its members. In addition, the unions are part of the constitutionally formed village panchayat, and most tribal members possess voting rights. In a few villages, some individuals are even elected as panchayat members.

Customs

The tribes form a strictly endogamous group, with clearly defined exogamous lineage groups. Uncle–niece marriages and cross-cousin marriages (such as a man marrying his father's sister's daughter or his mother's brother's daughter) are highly preferred. Child marriages are not uncommon, and some girls are married before attaining menarche. Monogamy is the most common form of marriage, though instances of polygyny are also observed. While marriages are generally arranged through negotiation and mutual consent, other forms, such as marriage by elopement, also occur. The society is patriarchal, and patrilocal residence is the norm. After marriage, couples typically live with the groom's parents for some time before some establish separate households, though the majority continue in joint family arrangements. Kinship terminology is

descriptive, with specific terms used for different kin members.

Food Habits

Rice is the staple food of the tribal communities. They are predominantly non-vegetarian and have few restrictions regarding diet. Their food includes fowls, pork, both scaly and scaleless fish, field rats, jackals, foxes, cats, mongooses, and even carrion. Most men consume country liquor and toddy, while bottled liquor is taken only occasionally. Both men and women commonly smoke and chew tobacco (Kranthi Kumar, 2013a). Although tea and coffee are consumed, the intake of milk and milk products remains very low.

Education and Occupation

Most members of the community are illiterate, though a few younger men are literate. Primary and secondary schools are available in nearby areas; however, only a small proportion of families send their children to these schools. Traditionally, these tribes were sometimes associated with occupations such as burglary, dacoity, theft, and robbery. In the present study area, however, most people are engaged in subsistence and small-scale occupations such as selling pork, making brooms and bamboo baskets, daily wage labour, and crafting toys for children. A few individuals are employed in private enterprises and government organizations.

Property and Economy

Traditionally, the community possesses little property in the form of houses, agricultural land, or jewellery (Rao & Jaswanth, 1998). Many families rear pigs and sell pork both within villages and in weekly markets. They also keep domestic animals such as pigs, hens, and dogs. Land ownership is uncommon; most families erect their huts either on government land or on the outskirts of villages. However, some households have benefited from government housing schemes. Property is inherited Patri lineally and is usually divided equally among the sons after the death of the father.

Dress

More than a century ago, accounts of the Rampachodavaram Agency Division described the traditional dress of the tribes as follows: men generally wore only a small apron (Goche), and during cold weather they wrapped a cloth around their shoulders. Women wore saris but did not cover their breasts. Men usually carried with them a bill-hook, bow, and arrows. With increasing cultural contact, the tribes gradually adopted the dress of their Telugu neighbours. Women came to dress more modestly than men, similar in style to the wandering basket makers, and in appearance resembled the Telugu people of the plains. Some tribes also wore caps made of wax, cloth, or deer and hare skin. Among fashionable groups, ornaments included attaching the tufted ear or bushy tail of the large Indian squirrel to the string used for tying hair into a bunch at the back of the head. Leafy garments were eventually replaced by white loincloths, and some women adopted the ravike (bodice), imitating female dress styles of the plains. At present, tribal men wear shirts made of cheap, colourful cloth stitched by tailors in neighbouring plains villages, while women commonly wear saris and blouses. Elderly men can still occasionally be seen wearing the traditional loincloth. Today, boys generally wear T-shirts and shorts, and girls wear frocks.

Ornaments

Traditional ornaments among the tribes are relatively few. Men typically wear brass rings on their fingers, while women adorn themselves with simple chains made of coloured beads around their necks. In recent times, the tribes have adopted the use of gold and silver ornaments similar to those worn by their caste neighbours. These include a variety of items such as bangles, toe rings, marriage lockets, and finger rings, although most families cannot afford them. Women commonly wear multiple ornaments on their wrists, ankles, ears, nose, and neck.

Religion

The religion of the tribal communities is primarily animistic, though the influence of Hinduism is evident in their ceremonies and rituals. They are polytheistic, with their principal deity represented in various forms and worshipped mainly on Fridays and Tuesdays. On special occasions, pigs, fowls, and goats are sacrificed to the deity, and community feasts are organized. Among the other animistic deities worshipped are Gandhi Pochamma, the goddess of smallpox, and Mahalaxmi, the goddess believed to protect against cholera. The tribes also hold beliefs in the souls of departed ancestors, who are venerated as part of their religious practices. Alongside these, Hindu gods such as Hanuman are also worshipped. In recent times, due to the intensive propagation of Christianity, some members of these communities have converted. Local Christian pastors have played a significant role in these conversions.

Festivals and Fairs

The tribes of the Rampachodavaram Agency Division celebrate a variety of festivals and fairs, many of which are associated with deities, agriculture, and seasonal cycles. Koyas: Bhudevi, Bhumatha; Konda Dora: Talupulamma; Konda Reddy: Muthyalamma, Pothuraju, Saralamma, Unnamalamma; Valmiki: Ganga Devudu, Sanku Devudu, Pedda Devudu; Parange Porja: Bhumi Devatha. In addition to these deity-centred celebrations, several tribal festivals are observed, including: Festival of Mother Earth, Mango Festival, Gangalamma Festival, Festival of Sowing, Festival of New Crops,

Festival of Seed Formation, Festival for Constructing Crop-Guarding Posts, Border Seedling Festival, Toddy Festival, Pulses Festival, Forest Kings Festival.

Life Cycle Ceremonies

Birth: A unique custom of great antiquity, still practiced to some extent among the tribes, is noteworthy in this ethnographic profile. At the onset of labour, the woman informs her husband, who immediately retires to a dark room and lies on a bed, covering himself with his wife's clothes. After the child is born, the newborn is placed beside the father. He remains confined to the bed for three days, during which he is considered impure. In contemporary times, however, these customs are not strictly followed. The mother is usually taken to a dai (traditional midwife, locally called Mantra-Sani) or to a local hospital for delivery. On the eleventh day after childbirth, both mother and child undergo a purification bath, after being anointed with oil and turmeric. This is followed by a feast for close relatives and friends. The entire period until purification is regarded as a time of pollution.

Name Giving: The tribes do not conduct a specific ceremony for naming a child. Usually, the elder or head of the community in the village gives the child a name according to traditional practices, or alternatively, the parents may name the child themselves. Often, the child is named after a favoured deity.

Puberty: When a girl attains her first menstruation, she is secluded in a room, veranda, or another designated space and must sit or sleep only on palm leaves until the pollution period is completed. Menstruation is regarded as unclean, and the girl remains in seclusion during this time. On the sixth or tenth day, a purification ceremony is performed. On this day, the girl's mother or a close relative removes all items used by the girl during the seclusion period. The girl is then given a bath with oil, turmeric, and neem leaves, and dressed in new clothes. A non-vegetarian feast is arranged for the family's relatives.

Marriage: When a tribal youth reaches marriageable age (usually below 20 years for boys and below 15 years for girls), his parents begin searching for a suitable bride or bridegroom. Once a suitable match is found and the proposal is accepted by both parties, a day is fixed for the agumadu (betrothal) ceremony. On that day, the boy's parents, accompanied by relatives, proceed to the girl's house, carrying a new mat made of date palm. Upon arrival, the mat is spread in an open space in front of the house, where the bride's father, relatives, and members of the kula panchayat are seated. The bride price is discussed and, once settled to the satisfaction of both parties, an amount of eight rupees is given as earnest money to the bride's father. Liquor is ordered at the expense of the groom's father and distributed among the gathering, with the first cup served to the bride's father; drinking it symbolizes the ratification of the alliance. On the morning of the wedding day, a marriage shed (pandal) is erected at the bride's house. The bride and groom are smeared five times with turmeric paste and oil, followed by bathing. They worship an earthen jar filled with water and a twig of the pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) with five offshoots. This water is carried to the marriage place by the bride's father in the evening.

As the auspicious hour approaches, the groom, carrying a dagger, is taken in procession to the bride's house, where he is joined by the bride. The couple, dressed in white, is seated facing the sanctified jar on squares of rice drawn on the date palm mat spread beneath the bower. Turmeric-coloured rice (akshintalu) is thrown over the couple - first by their parents, then by other guests - symbolizing the marriage. A pusti, a necklace of black beads, is tied around the bride's neck, and toe rings are placed on her toes. The ceremony continues until the early hours of the morning, with the bridal pair remaining seated throughout. The next morning, the couple is bathed, auspicious lights are waved around their faces by married women, and milk and curds are offered for drinking. The bride is then concealed in a neighbour's house by her mother, after which the groom seeks her out, carries her in his arms, and consummation takes place. Following this, the bride is taken to the groom's house.

Divorce: Divorce is permitted on the grounds of the wife's barrenness, unchastity, or disobedience. It is affected by turning her out of the house in the presence of the kula pedda (chief of the community) or the kula panchayat. The kula panchayat holds considerable authority in such matters. The woman is allowed to remarry; however, her first husband is compelled to refund the bride price he paid to her parents. All disputes regarding divorce are settled by the kula panchayat.

Death: The deceased are usually cremated, although burial in a lying posture - occasionally with the head pointing south - also occurs. In some cases, certain members are cremated while others are buried. The ashes are either left at the cremation site or thrown into a stream. Mourning is observed for five days, during which the principal mourner is considered polluted and abstains from non-vegetarian food. On the fifth day, a feast featuring non-vegetarian (pork) food is arranged for all relatives and community members. In honour of the deceased, birds are fed with food placed on leafy plates. The tribes strictly observe death ceremonies by inviting all community members to participate.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made to document the ethnohistory of the tribes. Writing the history of any community naturally involves exploring the evolution of its culture, which includes examining the ethnography of cultural change. A major challenge in writing the ethnohistory of these tribes is the lack of archaeological evidence and the scarcity of written sources. Fieldwork was therefore carried out over an extended period to supplement the limited written records. Even the available sources vary in their reliability and authenticity. The data collected through fieldwork had to be carefully filtered

to determine what was closest to the truth, including logical assumptions where necessary. Economic marginalization alone does not imply that no changes are occurring in other aspects of tribal life. The influence of the caste system and the spread of Hindu ideology have affected not only the social structure and other non-economic aspects of culture but also folklore. New elements have been added to folk songs and tales, while some older elements have been lost or modified. In conclusion, writing the ethnohistory of any tribe-whether in this study or elsewhere in the country-requires combining historical sources, folklore, and contemporary field data after critically assessing their authenticity. Even when making assumptions, careful examination of data from all sources is essential.

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