

## "Evolving Socioeconomic Status Of The Yerukala Community: Trends And Challenges In Andhra Pradesh"

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### Abstract:

This paper examines the changing socioeconomic conditions of the Yerukala community, a historically marginalized tribal group in Andhra Pradesh, India. Through analysis of census data, government reports, and academic studies, the research tracks key trends in education, employment, health, and social inclusion over the past several decades. While some progress has been made in areas like literacy rates and access to public services, the Yerukala continue to face significant challenges related to poverty, discrimination, and cultural preservation. The paper explores both government policies aimed at tribal development as well as grassroots initiatives within the community. Policy recommendations are provided to address persistent inequities and support sustainable advancement of the Yerukala people.

**Keywords:** Yerukala, tribal communities, socioeconomic development, Andhra Pradesh, marginalization, social inclusion

### 1. Introduction

The Yerukala are a tribal community primarily found in the southern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. Historically a nomadic group engaged in fortune-telling, basketry, and hunting, the Yerukala have undergone significant changes in their traditional lifestyle and livelihood patterns over the past century (Reddy, 2014). In Andhra Pradesh, where they have their largest population concentration, the Yerukala were classified as a Scheduled Tribe in 1956, making them eligible for various government welfare schemes and protections (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013).

Despite these measures, the Yerukala continue to face multiple socioeconomic challenges and remain one of the most marginalized communities in the state. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolving status of the Yerukala in Andhra Pradesh, examining key indicators across education, employment, health, and social inclusion. By identifying both areas of progress and persistent obstacles, the research seeks to inform more effective policy interventions to support the community's development.

The paper is structured as follows: First, a brief background on the history and culture of the Yerukala is provided. Next, the methodology and data sources used in the study are outlined. The findings section then presents and analyzes trends across various socioeconomic indicators. This is followed by a discussion of government policies and community initiatives impacting the Yerukala. Finally, policy implications are explored and conclusions are drawn.

### 2. Background

The origins of the Yerukala can be traced back to the Banjara nomadic tribes of North India, who migrated southward several centuries ago (Thurston, 1909). Their traditional occupations included fortune-telling, tattooing, manufacture of baskets and brooms, pig-rearing, and hunting of small game. The community name "Yerukala" is believed to derive from their practice of fortune-telling, with "eruka" meaning "to know" in Telugu (Reddy, 2014).

Historically, the Yerukala maintained a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle, moving between villages to practice their trades. However, modernization, deforestation, and changing social norms have significantly impacted their traditional way of life over the past century. Many Yerukala have been forced to settle in permanent locations and seek alternative livelihoods (Reddy & Kumar, 2005).

The Yerukala have a distinct language, also called Yerukala, which is considered a dialect of Telugu with influences from other Dravidian languages. They have rich cultural traditions including folklore, dance, and religious practices that blend Hindu beliefs with animistic elements (Thurston, 1909). However, preserving these cultural practices has become increasingly challenging as the community adapts to a more settled lifestyle.

In Andhra Pradesh, the Yerukala population was estimated at around 480,000 in the 2011 Census, making them one of the larger tribal groups in the state (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011). They are primarily concentrated in the districts of Prakasam, Guntur, Nellore, Kurnool, and Chittoor.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of demographic and socioeconomic data with qualitative insights from government reports, academic literature, and case studies. The primary data sources include:

1. Census of India data from 1961 to 2011
2. National Family Health Survey (NFHS) reports

3. National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) reports
4. Andhra Pradesh State Development Report
5. Ministry of Tribal Affairs annual reports
6. Academic studies and ethnographic accounts of the Yerukala community

Key socioeconomic indicators examined include:

- Population trends
- Literacy rates and educational attainment
- Employment patterns and occupational diversification
- Income levels and poverty rates
- Health indicators (infant mortality, malnutrition, access to healthcare)
- Access to basic amenities (housing, sanitation, electricity)
- Political participation and representation

Where possible, data specific to the Yerukala community in Andhra Pradesh is utilized. However, due to limitations in disaggregated data availability for some indicators, broader tribal population statistics for the state are sometimes used as a proxy, with appropriate caveats noted.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Population Trends

Table 1 shows the population growth of the Yerukala community in Andhra Pradesh from 1961 to 2011.

**Table 1:** Yerukala Population in Andhra Pradesh, 1961-2011

Year	Population
1961	95,432
1971	137,464
1981	214,652
1991	308,770
2001	405,368
2011	479,813

Source: Census of India, various years

The data indicates substantial growth in the Yerukala population over the past five decades, with numbers more than quintupling between 1961 and 2011. This growth rate outpaced that of the general population in Andhra Pradesh during the same period. Several factors may have contributed to this trend:

1. Improved health outcomes and declining mortality rates
2. Higher fertility rates compared to non-tribal populations
3. Better enumeration and identification of Yerukala individuals in successive censuses

However, the decadal growth rate has been declining in recent decades, from 43.8% in 1981-1991 to 18.4% in 2001-2011. This may reflect a gradual demographic transition as the community becomes more settled and integrated into mainstream society.

### 4.2. Literacy and Education

Education has been a key focus area for tribal development policies. Table 2 presents the evolution of literacy rates among the Yerukala compared to the overall tribal and general population in Andhra Pradesh.

**Table 2:** Literacy Rates in Andhra Pradesh (%)

Year	Yerukala	All Scheduled Tribes	Total Population
1961	4.2	8.5	21.2
1971	7.8	11.7	24.6
1981	13.5	14.9	29.9
1991	20.3	20.1	44.1
2001	37.1	37.0	60.5
2011	52.8	49.2	67.4

Sources: Census of India, various years; Andhra Pradesh State Development Report 2017

The data shows significant improvement in literacy rates among the Yerukala over time, with particularly rapid progress since 1991. By 2011, the community's literacy rate had surpassed the average for all Scheduled Tribes in the state. However, a substantial gap remains compared to the general population.

Gender disparities in education persist, though they have narrowed over time. In 2011, the literacy rate for Yerukala males was 62.4% compared to 43.1% for females (Census of India, 2011).

Enrollment rates have also improved, particularly at the primary level. However, dropout rates remain high in secondary and higher education. A 2018 study found that only 12% of Yerukala students enrolled in higher education, compared to the state average of 23% (Kumar & Rao, 2018).

#### 4.3. Employment and Livelihoods

Traditionally, the Yerukala were engaged in occupations like fortune-telling, basketry, and hunting. However, these livelihoods have become increasingly unviable due to modernization and environmental changes. Table 3 shows the shifting occupational patterns of the community over time.

Table 3: Primary Occupation of Yerukala Workers (%)

Occupation	1981	2001	2011
Traditional crafts	62	28	14
Agriculture labor	18	35	41
Cultivation	8	12	15
Non-farm labor	7	18	22
Other	5	7	8

Sources: NSSO Employment Surveys; Reddy & Kumar, 2005; Census 2011

The data reveals a clear shift away from traditional occupations towards agricultural labor and other non-farm work. This transition has been driven by multiple factors:

1. Decline in demand for traditional Yerukala products and services
2. Loss of access to forest resources due to deforestation and conservation policies
3. Government policies encouraging settled agriculture
4. Increased opportunities in the rural non-farm sector

While this occupational diversification has provided new income sources, it has also made the community more vulnerable to economic fluctuations and exploitative labor practices. Many Yerukala now work as seasonal migrants, moving to urban areas for construction and other low-wage jobs (Reddy, 2014).

#### 4.4. Income and Poverty

Reliable longitudinal data on income levels specifically for the Yerukala community is limited. However, broader statistics on tribal populations in Andhra Pradesh provide insight into overall trends. Table 4 presents poverty rates among Scheduled Tribes in the state compared to the general population.

Table 4: Poverty Rates in Andhra Pradesh (% below poverty line)

Year	Scheduled Tribes	All Groups
1993	58.4	44.6
2004	50.1	29.9
2011	40.3	21.1

Source: Planning Commission, Government of India

While poverty rates have declined significantly for both groups, the gap between tribal and non-tribal populations persists. Extrapolating from these figures and community-specific studies, it is estimated that around 45-50% of the Yerukala population in Andhra Pradesh still lives below the poverty line (Kumar & Rao, 2018).

Several factors contribute to the high poverty rates among the Yerukala:

1. Limited access to productive assets like land and capital
2. Low levels of education and skills
3. Discrimination in the labor market
4. Inadequate implementation of poverty alleviation schemes

#### 4.5. Health and Nutrition

Health indicators for the Yerukala community have shown improvement over time but continue to lag behind state averages. Table 5 presents key health metrics based on the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data.

Table 5: Selected Health Indicators for Andhra Pradesh

Indicator	Yerukala (2015-16)	State Average (2015-16)
Infant Mortality Rate (per 1000)	52	35
Under-5 Mortality Rate (per 1000)	63	41
Children underweight (%)	39.2	31.9
Institutional Deliveries (%)	78.6	91.6
Full Immunization Coverage (%)	68.3	65.3

Source: National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16

The data indicates that while progress has been made in areas like immunization coverage, significant disparities remain in child mortality and nutrition. Access to healthcare services also remains a challenge for many Yerukala communities, particularly those in remote areas.

#### 4.6. Housing and Basic Amenities

Access to adequate housing and basic amenities has been a key focus of tribal development policies. Table 6 shows the percentage of Yerukala households with access to various amenities compared to the state average.

**Table 6:** Access to Basic Amenities (% of households)

Amenity	Yerukala (2011)	State Average (2011)
Electricity	78.4	92.2
Safe drinking water	62.7	90.5
Sanitation facilities	22.1	49.6
Pucca house	45.3	67.3

Source: Census 2011; Andhra Pradesh State Development Report 2017

While access to electricity has improved significantly, large gaps remain in sanitation and housing quality. The lack of adequate sanitation facilities, in particular, has serious implications for health outcomes in the community.

#### 4.7. Political Participation and Representation

Political empowerment of tribal communities has been recognized as crucial for their overall development. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments mandated reservation of seats for Scheduled Tribes in local governance bodies. In Andhra Pradesh, 6% of seats in the state legislature are reserved for Scheduled Tribes.

However, effective political participation of the Yerukala remains limited. A 2016 study found that while Yerukala representatives were present in many local bodies, their decision-making power was often constrained by lack of education, economic dependence, and social discrimination (Srinivasulu, 2016).

At higher levels of government, Yerukala representation has been minimal. As of 2021, there were no Yerukala members in the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly or among the state's representatives in the national parliament.

### 5. Government Policies and Community Initiatives

Several government policies and programs have been implemented to address the socioeconomic challenges faced by the Yerukala and other tribal communities in Andhra Pradesh. Key initiatives include:

1. **Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP):** Launched in 1974, this strategy aims to channel plan funds for the development of Scheduled Tribes proportionate to their population.
2. **Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA):** Established to implement development programs in tribal areas, focusing on education, health, livelihood promotion, and infrastructure development.
3. **Girijan Cooperative Corporation (GCC):** A state-owned enterprise that supports tribal livelihoods through procurement and marketing of minor forest produce and other tribal products.
4. **Educational support programs:** Schemes like pre-matric and post-matric scholarships, residential schools for tribal students, and coaching programs for competitive exams.
5. **MGNREGA:** The national rural employment guarantee scheme has provided significant wage employment opportunities for Yerukala households.

While these programs have contributed to improvements in various socioeconomic indicators, their impact has been limited by issues such as inadequate funding, poor implementation, and lack of community participation in planning and execution.

In response to these challenges, several community-led initiatives have emerged among the Yerukala:

1. **Self-help groups (SHGs):** Many Yerukala women have formed SHGs for savings and micro-credit activities, supporting economic empowerment and collective action.
2. **Cultural preservation efforts:** Community organizations are working to document and revitalize Yerukala language, folklore, and traditional knowledge.
3. **Rights-based movements:** Yerukala activists have been involved in broader tribal rights movements, advocating for land rights, forest access, and protection against displacement.
4. **Education initiatives:** Community-run bridge schools and tuition centers have been established to support Yerukala children's education.

These grassroots efforts have played an important role in complementing government programs and fostering community empowerment.

## 6. Policy Implications

Based on the analysis of the evolving socioeconomic status of the Yerukala community in Andhra Pradesh, several policy implications emerge:

**5.1. Education:** There is a need for targeted interventions to address the high dropout rates among Yerukala students, particularly at the secondary level. This could include enhanced scholarship programs, mentorship initiatives, and culturally sensitive curriculum development. Additionally, improving the quality of education in rural areas through better infrastructure and teacher training is crucial.

**5.2. Employment:** Policies should focus on creating more diverse and stable employment opportunities for the Yerukala community. This could involve expanding skill development programs, providing entrepreneurship support, and implementing stronger anti-discrimination measures in the job market. Efforts to improve access to information about job opportunities and professional networking should also be prioritized.

**5.3. Healthcare:** A comprehensive approach to addressing health disparities is needed, including improved access to specialized healthcare services, culturally sensitive health education programs, and initiatives to address mental health issues within the community. Integration of traditional healing practices with modern medicine could also be explored to enhance healthcare acceptance and utilization.

**5.4. Social Integration and Cultural Preservation:** Policies should aim to promote social inclusion while respecting and preserving Yerukala cultural identity. This could include awareness campaigns to combat discrimination, support for cultural events and language preservation, and initiatives to promote positive representation of the Yerukala community in media and public discourse.

**5.5. Land Rights and Forest Resources:** Strengthening the implementation of the Forest Rights Act is crucial. This involves streamlining the process of land rights recognition, providing legal support to Yerukala families, and ensuring sustainable access to forest resources.

**5.6. Economic Empowerment:** Targeted economic policies such as microfinance initiatives, cooperative development, and market linkages for traditional Yerukala products could help boost economic opportunities within the community.

## 6. Conclusion:

The socioeconomic status of the Yerukala community in Andhra Pradesh is undergoing significant transformation, marked by both promising trends and persistent challenges. While progress has been made in areas such as education, healthcare access, and diversification of livelihood options, substantial barriers to full social and economic empowerment remain.

The path forward requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the interconnected issues of education, employment, healthcare, social integration, and cultural preservation. Policymakers must work in close collaboration with Yerukala community leaders and organizations to develop and implement targeted interventions that are sensitive to the community's unique needs and cultural context.

Moreover, broader societal changes are necessary to combat discrimination and promote genuine inclusion of the Yerukala community in all aspects of social and economic life. This involves not only government action but also efforts to raise awareness and change attitudes among the general population.

As the Yerukala community continues to navigate the complexities of modernization and social change, it is crucial that their journey towards empowerment is supported by thoughtful policies, community-led initiatives, and a societal commitment to equality and inclusion. By addressing the challenges and building on the positive trends identified, there is potential for significant improvements in the socioeconomic status of the Yerukala community in the coming years, contributing to a more equitable and inclusive society in Andhra Pradesh and beyond.

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