

KONDA REDDIES - An anachronism?

**-ASOK KUMAR G. IAS
Project Officer,
ITDA, Bhadrachalam,
Andhra Pradesh, India**

Konda Reddies are one of the most primitive tribes of Andhra Pradesh, their life style quite antithetic to that of their name sakes -the Reddies of the plains. They live in a very primitive stage of development - in the hunter, food gatherer stage of human civilization. They call themselves Pandava Reddies after the five Pandava brothers, the great heroes of Mahabharatha, from whom they trace their descent. Konda Reddies are also called Hill Reddies, konda being the telugu for hills.

The total population of Konda Reddies is about 54000, which is just about 1.7% of the total tribal population of the state. They are found in the picturesque Papi hill ranges on either side of the Godavari river in the East and West Godavari districts and on the hill tracts of Khammam district of AP. River Godavari and Papi hills are hence very much a part of the life and culture of the Konda Reddies.

PHYSICAL FEATURES

A Konda Reddy is, in general, of small height with sturdy stature. Their legs are shorter than their upper body. Their complexion is copper brown or dark chocolate. The grain of the skin is coarse. They have wavy and sometimes curly hair. The men make a tuft of their long wavy hair as their coiffure. Their glowing face is heart shaped, with pointed nose, clear prominent nasal holes and incomplete lips making a small mouth.

For those anthropologically inclined the results of some anthropometric studies are as follows. The mean stature of a Konda Reddy male is 180.05 +/- 0.54 cms while that of a Konda Reddy female is 161.37 +/- 0.59 cms. The mean cephalic index of the male and female Konda Reddy are 72.25 and 75.62 respectively, indicating that they are Dolicocephalic. A study of ABO blood group frequencies among them revealed that the frequency of O group was maximum (37.5%), followed by A (33.3), B (25) and AB (4.2). The study of dermatoglyphics suggests that about 50% have whorls, followed by ulnar loops (36%), radial loops and arches.

CULTURE

Prof. Haimendorff would classify the culture they practice to that of the Neolithic age. Their podu cultivation, digging stick and the bow and arrow technology belong to the pre-agriculture era. The Konda Reddies shun contact with outside world and are blissfully uninterested in the developments taking place in their neighbourhoods. They are very contented with the isolated life they lead with absolutely minimum wants. They are distrustful of anybody meeting them and have a "touch-us-not" attitude with even their immediate neighbors, the Koyas, who are only slightly well-off than them. They consider themselves superior to the Koyas.

Telugu is their mother tongue. They speak chaste Telugu with an accent of their own. They are educationally very backward with only 2 % of them are literates.

There are no totemic clans among Konda Reddies like among Koyas. Exogamous septs or "intiperlu"- family names still form the basis of their social organisation. These surnames regulate marriages. Persons with same surnames cannot inter marry. The following surnames are commonly found among Konda Reddies:

Aragantla, Agedela, Andala, Arecell, Arusukula, Barchea, Bhattu, Bisala, Boduluru, Boli, Buzur, Chedala, Chendala, Chintala, Cholea, Damala, Dasakattula, Dipala, Duchai, Gadabala, Gatreddi, Gogula, Golla, Gudanela, Gugunta, Gurukuntla, Jampa, Kakuri, Kalmuka, Kanabala, Kanugula, Karakala, Kelala, Ketchala, Kittula, Konala, Kondala, Kondamodalu, Kopal, Koppu, Korukodi, Kotlarla, Madi, Madkam, Matla, Mula, Murala, Mutiwada, Pallala, Parchika, Patla, Peeru, Pitla, Pogula, Poteri, Purari, Radala, Revula, Sadala, Sagina, Sambaudu, Sidi, Sintalavada, Sokula, Sonkala, Sukura, Suntru, Tammala, Tammila, Thumbaudu, Tumuru, Upochoti, Valala, Veluguni, Vendula, Ventla, Vinela etc.

Descent is patrilineal, authority patriarchal (ie father or the elderly male member is the boss of the family and males inherit the family properties), residence patrilocal (ie married woman stays in husband's house). Marriages can be by service (Illatam- when the prospective groom serves the brides family for a fixed time), by capture, elopement, negotiation, exchange etc. Details of these are given elsewhere in this paper. Divorce and widow marriage are socially approved. Levirate and sororate are in vogue. Polygyny is accepted but not polyandry. Bride price or "oli" is paid to the parents of the bride. Marriage is performed in the house of the groom.

DRESS CODE

Quite like the people at the opposite end of the civilization spectrum, the Konda Reddies too are averse to too much attire.

Men generally wear the barest minimum- a loin cloth called "Gochi" covers the vitals. It is a narrow strip of cloth drawn in between the legs and looped over a twined cord made of Adda fibre wound several times around the waist as a band - a precursor of the modern "G-string"?. A knife or a bill-hook tucked handle upwards and blade against the skin would complete their sartorial code. Now many of them have started using a shirt to cover the upper torso.

The women's dress consists of a saree, a small loin cloth and in some places a bodice also.

HOUSE AND HOUSEHOLD ITEMS.

They live in small colonies tucked on hill tops. Their thatched huts are square or rectangular in shape. They use mud plastered bamboo wattle or mud blocks as walls. The roof is constructed with locally available bamboo and timber. It is covered with thatch or palm leaves. The house construction is a corporate activity in which the male members of other Konda Reddy families help each other. Usually their house has two rooms- one kitchen and another bed room. The rooms do not have any windows and all smoke billowing from the chulhas waft around the room with gay abundance.

They stay in their simple "farm houses" - made on four wooden pillars with bamboo thatti flooring and a similar roof - during the podu period.

In their house there are hardly any article that can be called as household items. A digging stick, an iron chopper, a bill hook and a small knife, two or three earthen pots, one or two wooden ladders, dried gourd as water bottles, bamboo thatties for sleeping completes the inventory of a hill-top Konda Reddy house.

LIVELIHOOD:

The Konda Reddies practice podu cultivation or gather forest produce and sell in the local market called "Santha" for eking out their living. One "konda cheepu" ie the broom made out of tall wild forest grasses would fetch Rs 13, a bamboo basket Rs 10. Some of the river side Konda Reddies have smelt success in fishing. They also hunt wild animals, cook and eat them. They strongly feel that the forest and anything in the forest belongs to them.

Many of them are very experts in making baskets out of bamboo. Their nimble fingers can weave the warps and wefts of two to three baskets a week. They can produce more, but they are not very ambitious. They take these baskets to the nearby shandy to sell or barter it for their requirements.

AGRICULTURE:

The P.T.Gs on the Godavari basin are aware of agriculture due to interaction with progressive nontribal farmers/ settlers from East Godavari district. Some of the Konda Reddies work as labourers in the fields of the progressive nontribal farmers. Hence the Godavari bank P.T.Gs are better off in agriculture, compared to those P.T.Gs living in the hills, who do a little Podu cultivation. These Godavari side P.T.Gs today grow Paddy, Cotton, Chilly, Tobacco, Jowar, Redgram, Blackgram, Sunflower etc. The fertile lands V.R.Puram, Velairpad, Aswaraopeta and Chinturu are now brought under cultivation.

The hill tribals, due to non availability of cultivable patta lands, are not able to grow any settled crops. The method they follow is PODU cultivation, or better known as shifting cultivation. Vast areas of forest are cut down : they have no qualms about it. They burn these trees, many a time costly timber like teak etc go up in smoke, much to the chagrin of the forest officials. The ashes act as good natural organic manure for the crops they raise. They make holes and pulverize the soil with some wooden stick capped with a small iron piece made by local black-smiths. After this they sow the seeds of dry crops like Samalu, Korallu, Jowar, Bajra, Redgram and Thydal.

It is an interesting sight to see network of ropes made of peeled bamboo skin criss-crossing connecting one hill top to others. They dangle bunches of bamboo strips at various nodes of this primitive network. When given small tugs, these strips make sharp staccatos, loud enough to scare away any uninvited birds pecking at the fruits of their labour.

FOOD:

The PTGs of the hilly areas use Jowar as a staple food, followed by tubers. Jeeluga Bark is dried and ground to make flour to prepare roti as well as a beverage. They pound samalu, korallu into powder. In a small earthen pot, which is one of the few earthly belongings of these people, they boil it with water to make JAWA, a gruel(ganji) like food. Chilly chutney and tamarind pulp boiled in water with salt forms the side dish. Eating of rice is very rare ie. on occasions of festivals and pongals only. The river side PTGs, however, take rice regularly.

The riverside PTGs take fish. Meat of hunted animals and birds are also consumed. They do not take beef, though pork is eaten with relish. Toddy, tapped from Palmyrah, caryota and country date palm trees keep them in "high spirits".

During the lean season wild tubers and roots like "Teegagedda", "Chedugedda" are taken. Dried and powdered mango kernel and the pith of caryota palm are also taken. The "chanda gedda", which is considered poisonous by them is kept in running water for 24 hrs to remove the toxicity.

KULA PANCHAYAT:

They have a very democratic institution of social control called kula panchayat. It is a gathering of all elders of the village. The traditional headman is called Pedda Kapu.

The post is hereditary. He is also the pujari of the local deities. His brother or the nearest male relative is called Pinna Kapu, who takes over during the absence of the Pedda Kapu.

Under the leadership of Pedda Kapu, Panchayats are conducted for settling any community offenses like elopements, incest, adultery, assignment of podu lands, etc. Everybody obeys their judgment, mostly based on the majority opinion of the family heads.

The "Kula Pedda" arbitrates the disputes between Konda Reddy villages and also those which could not be settled amicably at the local level. His decision is final.

GODS AND GODDESSES:

Like all primitive tribes, these Konda Reddies also are overawed by the super natural powers. They believe in the existence of spirit beings like the soul of the dead persons. The benevolent deities are revered and propitiated to secure their sustained blessings, while the malevolent ones are "battered up" by offering sacrifices to escape from their wrath. This wrath, they believe, causes illness and destroys their podu.

They worship local konda dieties like Mutyalamma (village deity), Bhumi Devi (earth goddess), Gangamma Devi (river goddess), Pancha Pandavas, Gubbala Mangamma, Saralamma etc. They perform pujas and sometimes offer bloody sacrifices.

CUSTOMS AND FASHIONS :

P.T.Gs follow very old customs and taboos. At the attainment of maturity, the girls are kept away from their hut for 7 days. During these 7 days one old woman of another house will assist that girl. The members of the girl's family would neither go near nor see the girl during this period. During their monthly periods, the hill P.T.G women stay outside their house, but a plain P.T.G woman stays in the same house only, though, she doesn't enter the kitchen. During this period the food is prepared by either the husband or his parents. During the last two months of her pregnancy they keep the pregnant woman in a small hut away from their house. She continues to stay there even upto two months after the delivery. During that period also one old woman will assist her. They conduct a special puja on the new mother before letting her to enter the house again.

CONCLUSION:

The Konda Reddies are an interesting sect of people, who were left behind by the rest of the world in its rapid strides of development. They appear to be in the wrong time slot. Efforts are being made by The Integrated Tribal Development Agency under the Tribal Welfare wing of the Social Welfare Department of the Government of Andhra Pradesh to correct this historic wrong. Thrust is being given by a very specially orchestrated team to improve the education, health, social and financial condition of the Konda Reddies. Residential schools have been started exclusively for the PTG children. Regular health camps are being conducted to improve their health conditions. Steps are being taken to accustom them to settled agriculture, leaving behind the shifting cultivation which is highly uneconomical and also spells environmental doom.

Better late than never!

Bibliography:

1. Various journals of TCR & TI, Hyderabad
2. Discussions with **Chinappa Reddy and Brahmi Reddy of Kunavaram mandal**