



OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY AMONG THE ADIVASIS OF TELUGU-SPEAKING REGIONS

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Abstract

The occupational mobility of Adivasi communities in the Telugu-speaking regions of India, with a focus on the Bhil, Chenchu, Gadaba, Naikpod, and Yerukula tribes. Through historical, ethnographic, and policy-based perspectives, it explores the transition from traditional forest-based subsistence systems to more diversified occupational structures involving agriculture, wage labor, crafts, and informal market activities. The analysis highlights the impacts of colonial and postcolonial interventions, environmental pressures, cultural resistance, and adaptive strategies. It emphasizes the interlinkage of livelihood practices with identity, kinship, ecological knowledge, and community governance. The study advocates for development models that respect indigenous knowledge systems and promote inclusive, sustainable economic participation.

Keywords-*Adivasi tribes, occupational mobility, Telugu-speaking regions, Bhil, Chenchu, Gadaba, Naikpod, Yerukula, shifting cultivation, forest economy, tribal identity, state intervention, cultural adaptation, indigenous knowledge, livelihood transformation, PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups)*

Introduction

This chapter explores occupational mobility among select Adivasi tribes in Telugu-speaking regions, focusing on the Bhil, Chenchu, Gadaba, Naikpod, and Yerukula communities. Drawing from historical, ethnographic, and administrative records, it traces how these communities have transitioned from traditional forest-based subsistence activities to diverse occupational structures influenced by colonial and postcolonial state interventions, market integration, and socio-cultural transformations. The analysis sheds light on the interplay between environment, state policy, cultural identity, and economic adaptation in shaping the livelihoods of these communities.

The Bhil Tribe

Historical Context and Migration

The Bhils, one of India's largest tribal groups, historically inhabited the mountainous regions surrounding Aurangabad in the Deccan. Migration from Khandesh due to political upheaval brought them into the Telugu-speaking regions. Their martial traditions and forest-based livelihoods were gradually transformed through colonial military recruitment and later agricultural integration. The Bhils' interactions with Mughal and Maratha rulers were marked by alternating phases of militarization and violent subjugation, particularly during the Peshwa regime.

Livelihood and Economy

Traditionally forest dwellers and expert archers, Bhils engaged in hunting, gathering, and occasional raiding. Colonial policies encouraged sedentary agriculture, introducing coarse cereals and vegetable cultivation. Many Bhils also became wage laborers in construction and public works, and some engaged in crafts like basket weaving and tattoo artistry. Women played a significant economic role, especially in managing livestock, brewing mahua liquor, and collecting forest produce. Today, their economic practices reveal a hybrid system that balances subsistence farming, seasonal wage labor, and informal market participation. Additionally, younger Bhils are entering service-sector jobs in small towns, thanks to reservation policies and educational schemes, though access remains uneven.

Cultural and Mythological Identity

The Bhils identify with mythological figures such as Nishad and are mentioned in epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, reinforcing their historical and cultural legitimacy. Their descent myths and tales of divine punishment and exile symbolize their alienation from mainstream society and affinity with the wilderness, forming a core part of their identity and resistance ethos. Oral traditions, festivals, and songs continue to uphold their identity and transmit knowledge across generations.

The Chenchu Tribe

Forest Economy and State Intervention

Inhabiting the Nallamala forests, the Chenchus historically depended on hunting and gathering. State intervention began in the 19th century with forest administration regulating their rights and attempting to integrate them into settled agriculture. These efforts often clashed with their nomadic worldview. The Chenchus' resistance to regulation stemmed from both cultural disposition and the logistical hardships of adapting to fixed cultivation practices. Moreover, their spiritual connection to forests as living entities complicates attempts to relocate or integrate them into agrarian systems.

The Amrabad Scheme and Its Impact

The 1942 Amrabad Chenchu Ameliorative Scheme designated a Chenchu Reserve to protect their rights and livelihoods. While aiming for agricultural integration, many Chenchus preferred traditional methods like dibbling over plough cultivation. Forest labor under state and private contractors became a vital livelihood source. The scheme also restricted the entry of outsiders and moneylenders, aiming to create a self-reliant tribal economy, though implementation inconsistencies limited its success. Educational initiatives and medical aid under the scheme had limited reach due to geographical remoteness and cultural alienation.

Cultural Practices and Tools

The Chenchus use traditional tools such as the dokudupara, karra para, and Chenchu kathhi for agriculture and hunting. Honey collection remains a culturally significant and hazardous occupation, reflecting intricate kinship ties and trust structures. This ritualized practice is symbolic of mutual dependence, familial obligation, and gendered roles in their community economy. Their unique rope-climbing techniques and reliance on family networks underscore the importance of trust and ritual in subsistence activities.

The Gadaba Tribe

Economic Structure

The Gadabas practice both shifting (podu) and settled cultivation. Their agro-forest economy includes the collection of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP), raising livestock, and limited market engagement. Many are landless, and land alienation remains a serious issue. Traditional ownership is often informal, and legal ambiguity over patta lands has left many vulnerable to exploitation by moneylenders and non-tribal cultivators. Their reliance on podu reflects not just economic necessity but deep-rooted ecological knowledge and adaptability.

Vulnerability and Government Classification

As a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), the Gadabas face issues like low literacy and subsistence-level economies. Government schemes target them for welfare, yet infrastructural and educational deficits persist. Programs promoting organic farming and self-help groups (SHGs) have had mixed results, with some success in women's micro-enterprise initiatives but limited overall transformation. Their integration into tribal cooperatives like Girijan Cooperative Corporation (GCC) has provided some protection from exploitation, though bureaucratic inefficiencies remain.

The Naikpod Tribe

Agro-Forest Transition

Originally practicing shifting cultivation in the hilly tracts of Telangana, the Naikpods have moved towards settled agriculture due to ecological pressures and forest laws. Their economy now combines farming with wage labor. The Naikpods traditionally viewed land as communal and sacred, with cultivation rights often decided by clan elders, a practice disrupted by formal land registration and ownership regimes. Seasonal migration for labor has increased, especially to urban construction sites and agricultural estates.

Mythological Justification and Practice

Their continued practice of podu cultivation is supported by mythological narratives involving the Pandavas, reflecting a deep cultural legitimacy for their economic practices. Tools like the konki and borigi are used in traditional farming. These narratives function as a cultural

resistance to state-imposed models of development and provide a legitimizing framework for traditional agricultural knowledge. Community festivals centered around harvest cycles reinforce these practices and help preserve intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

The Yerukula Tribe

Occupational Diversity and Clan Structure

The Yerukulas, a plains tribe, are highly diversified in occupation, ranging from basket weaving to fortune-telling. Their sub-sects reflect occupational specialization, and their name derives from the practice of divination. These occupational sub-castes include salt traders, rope makers, pig breeders, tattoo artists, and singers, showing an intricate linkage between labor and lineage. Urban Yerukulas are increasingly entering informal sectors such as sanitation, domestic labor, and petty trade, adapting fluidly to changing urban dynamics.

Environmental Adaptation

Different environmental conditions influence Yerukula's occupational practices. For example, in forest-rich areas, they engage in the collection and trade of curry leaves, while in others, they focus on agriculture and craft production. Their itinerant lifestyle historically enabled trade over vast networks and contributed to their multilingual capabilities and adaptability. Seasonal migration and barter-based exchange practices helped them cope with climatic and market uncertainties.

Cultural and Social Organization

The Yerukula society is patriarchal, with exogamous clans and a strong caste Panchayat system for dispute resolution. They follow a syncretic religious practice combining Hindu deities with tribal beliefs. Their customary legal system includes elaborate rituals and sanctions, emphasizing community cohesion and cultural autonomy. The Panchayat's authority extends to regulating marriage norms, resolving disputes, and maintaining moral order, thus acting as a parallel governance system.

Conclusion

The occupational mobility of Adivasi communities in Telugu-speaking regions reveals a complex interplay of tradition, resistance, and adaptation. While state interventions and market forces have reshaped tribal livelihoods, traditional knowledge systems and cultural identities continue to inform their economic strategies. Any developmental efforts must recognize and incorporate these indigenous frameworks to ensure sustainable and respectful integration. Future research should further investigate gendered aspects of tribal economies, inter-tribal labor networks, the effects of climate change on subsistence patterns, and the long-term impacts of state welfare policies on tribal autonomy. Attention should also be given to youth aspirations, educational transformations, and how emerging technologies intersect with tribal economies.

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