

## A FOLKLORISTICS AND ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO STUDY OF HISTORY AND PRESENT STATUS OF THE VADDERAS OF VURUMODLA VILLAGE IN TELANGANA

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**Abstract:** Vadderas, a denotified tribe i.e., tribes who were branded as born criminals through the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 and after the independence were renamed as Denotified residing in the combined state of Andhra Pradesh are well known for their stone-cutting and soil-digging skills. They were praised as a community who were responsible for quenching the thirst of people for generations through their well-digging skills. They were also known to have constructed roads and laid down railway lines during the colonial rule of the British. The Vadderas folklore talks about them being rulers once upon a time. The oral tradition also gives information about their ruling past based on the information collected in the village through in-depth interviews. At present, the Vadderas are one of the most downtrodden communities present in the Telugu states, especially in the state of Telangana. This paper talks about their believed history and their present livelihood through the data collected from the village named Vurumodla in the state of Telangana, India.

**Keywords:** Vadderas, Denotified tribes, Folklore, Oral tradition, Stone-cutting, Soil-digging.

### Introduction

Tracing the history of something or someone is a very tedious job that too finding the history of a community that has been ignored for generations is a much more complex task. Every community present in our country will have aspects about themselves that they share with the next generation. It is called oral history. Even though the elements that are being passed may have been modified from the original information, the core element will still remain the same. Ethnographic studies largely help us in finding out these data. The following paper gives details about the Vaddera community and their believed history in the village of Vurumodla in the state of Telangana, India and their journey till now.

Vadderas, a denotified tribe residing in the combined state of Andhra Pradesh are well known for their stone-cutting and soil-digging skills. They were praised as a community who were responsible for quenching the thirst of people for generations through their well-digging skills (Khan, 2019). They were also known to have constructed roads and laid down railway lines during the invasion of the British. However, they were branded as thieves by the British rulers (Kennedy, 1985). They were made to stay together in certain confined settlements in the name of Rehabilitation by the British (N.Neela and G.Ambrosia, 2015). These settlements later became their villages (Lalitha, 1987). Vadderas in Andhra Pradesh state are residing in these villages for generations now. But the sad part is that discrimination

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towards them is a day-to-day business. The little literature available on them during the British era is also a proof for that (Baines, 1912).

Vadderas are known for their unique culture for example the Vaddera women used to wear bangles only on their left hand since they believe that they are half alive and would leave the other hand empty, in the past the women never wore bodice, they never allowed Muslim sorcerer to enter their homes and all this is related to their folklore story. In this way they had certain features which are still being continued. They believe in village deities and their traditions are similar to that of the Hindus. In Telangana, Vadderas are distributed throughout the state and the major number of people are present in the southern part of the state. Even though they are a denotified tribe/community, they are placed under the Backward Caste (BC) because of which they are unable to enjoy the fruits of reservation and are not protected by the constitution from prejudice and abuse. The literacy rate is very low and they are still dependent on their community-based occupation as well as on other hard-core labour works (Lashkar, 2013).

### **Objectives**

In this paper, the author's main objective is to understand the historicity of Vadderas through folklore and oral history by carrying in-depth interviews among the elderly of the village. The elderly were chosen because through observation the researchers found that the older generation are well-versed with their own history than the younger ones. The paper also explores their present status through an ethnographic study.

### **Significance of study**

The Vaddera folklore talks about them being rulers once upon a time. The Vadderas in the village prefer themselves to be called as Vadde Rajulu/ Oddra Rajulu and here the word *Rajulu* in local dialect means rulers. Vadderas spend whatever they earn and when questioned about their savings they jokingly told the researchers that their ancestors were kings and had only thought them to spend lavishly and hence they are doing so.

Even today the Vadderas in many villages of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh states talk about their ancestry being glorious (Siraj-ul-Hassan, 1920). The oral tradition also gives information about their ruling past. At present, the Vadderas are one of the most downtrodden communities present in the said states. They were nomadic in nature in the earlier times and are settled to a large extent now showcasing a paradigm shift in their habitation. Their nomadic lifestyle is one of the reasons their children are unable to pursue education. Their traditional livelihood is also at stake due to the availability of heavy machinery and modernisation of equipment. They are now surviving as daily wage labour in the construction industry as well

as in marginal agricultural activities.

### **Village profile**

Vurumodla is a village in Chityala Mandal of Nalgonda district in the state of Telangana. It is three hours away from the state capital Hyderabad by bus. According to the Panchayat board (Local government) of Vurumodla, the total number of households in the village is approximately 220 of which Vadder's households are more than 150 in number. The village has a Panchayat office along with a primary school and Anganwadi. Agricultural fields are present surrounding the village. CC road is seen in front of many houses and is in connection with the village's main road. Five temples are exclusively dedicated to the village deity Eedhamma who is the main deity of Vadder's. Apart from Vadder's, other communities in the village belong to Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), Backward Caste (BC), and Other Castes (OC). The houses of the Vadder's are permanent buildings. They are small in terms of area with just one to two rooms. The earlier *Sarpanch* (Head of the Panchayat) of the village belonged to the Vadder's community but now the *Sarpanch* hails from the Reddy community (a forward caste). Both men and women indulge in community-based occupations or other odd jobs.

### **Methodology**

The authors have used a mixed-method approach. The qualitative research method is used wherein the data is collected through the ethnographic method, in-depth interviews with the elderly of the village. Focus Group Discussions were carried out to get nuances of their present status. Ethnography helps in studying a particular culture in depth and is being widely used by the social scientists (Bernard, 2006) (Krishnaswami & Ranganatham, 1983). Therefore, the researchers went to the Vurumodla Village and collected primary data. The quantitative data was used for socio-economic and demographic profiling. The data points were used to support arguments made through qualitative approach.

### **Social history**

The Vadder's of Vurumodla believe that they were rulers back in history. They hold that they are from Odisha state of India which earlier was called Odra Desham (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909). They were called *Oddra Rajulu* (Rao, 2020). Rajulu literally means 'Kings'. The elders who were well-versed in their history shared their experiences with the researcher. According to them, Oddra Rajulu/ Vadde Rajulu ruled the northernmost point of present Andhra Pradesh state extending up to the southern region of Odisha.

There lived a famous Telugu poet Srinatha who was a patron under Reddy Raja ruler Peddhakomati Vema Reddy. He was ruling Kondaveedu, a region in the

present Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. Srinatha poet was famous for defeating Gouda Dindimabattu, another famous poet who was a patron under Devaraya II of the Vijayanagara kingdom (an Empire which ruled Karnataka and parts of Andhra Pradesh in medieval times). Impressed by the knowledge of Srinatha, Devaraya II showered him with gold coins. It was a proud moment in the history of the Telugu language (Bapu, 1993). When Peddhakomati Vema Reddy was defeated by another king, Srinatha had to leave the kingdom. He went to the adjacent kingdom which according to the history was the kingdom of Gajapathi Kings. But, in the village of Vurumodla, the people claim that they are Oddra Rajulu. Here the poet is involved in agricultural activities. Due to the floods, he lost the crop but was still forced by the Oddra Rajulu to pay the tax. Srinatha wrote about his suffering in the form of a poem (Rao, 2020). Here these people show the poem as a proof that they were rulers and had lost their kingdom to the invasions of the kingdoms adjacent to theirs in the later times.

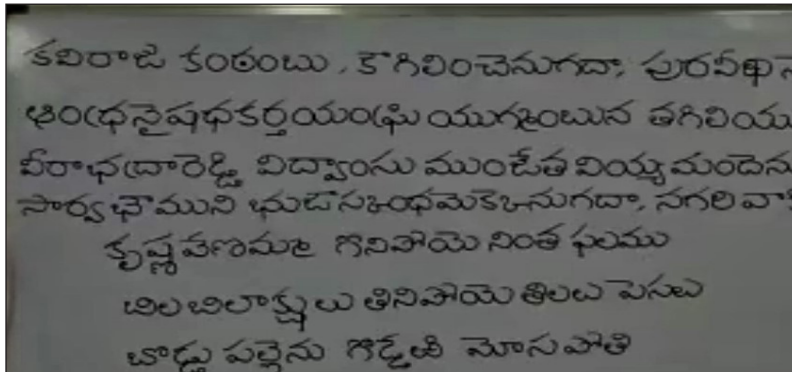


Figure – 1: The Poem written by Srinatha Poet

The poem gives a glimpse about how he had a glorious past and how he lost it all. It further talks about the floods taking away the harvest and the field turning into a wasteland and finally how will he be able to pay the tax to the kings.

The Vaddera elder explained that they lost their kingdom due to the inefficiency of the successors. Unable to bear the burden of defeat and unwillingness to continue living in their lost kingdom they left for forests. The Vadderars were physically strong, may be because they were rulers and indulged in continuous physical activity. Therefore, they adopted a profession that required physical strength. Their livelihood is stone-cutting and soil-digging which requires a lot of physical strength. In forests, they had adopted a lifestyle of forest dwelling. They hunt down small game for consumption. They made their own tools and developed unique techniques for stone-cutting and soil-digging. In later times, the British government branded them as criminals because they were believed to have criminal propensities (Kapadia, 1952) and implemented many forest laws such as the Indian Forest act of 1865,

and the Indian Forest Act of 1878 which restricted the rights of local communities in the forests.

The laws of the British forced the Vadderas to leave the forests. Consequently, they moved to the nearby villages and involved themselves in providing services to the villagers and earned a living (Bokil, 2002). Like untouchables, they did not reside on the outskirts of the village but instead, they lived outside the village. It may be because they were not part of the village stayed there to just provide services. After certain period of time, they would move to the next village and so on. Recognising their services and skill the British forced them to lay railway lines and also involved them in digging canals.

Vadderas earlier were divided into eleven sub-castes depending on the material they chose and each caste claimed itself to be superior to the other (Nagalavi, 2019). In Vurumodla, the elders told the researcher that they earlier had those divisions but now the classification is absent and all they could recall is '*Matti*' Vadderas who are into soil-digging and '*Banda*' Vadderas who work with the stones.

### **The story of Balanagamma**

The folklore of Vadderas talk about the story of Balanagamma. who is believed to be a princess. She was married to a King named Karyavaddi Raju. who according to the Vadderas of Vurumodla is a descendent of Kakatiyas (Rulers of the Telugu states from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century). Balanagamma was kidnapped by a Fakir (Muslim sorcerer). Balanagamma's husband and her relatives all are turned into stones by the Fakir when they tried to save her and they stayed in that state for a period of 12 years. Later, Balanagamma's son Balavaddi Raju rescued her.

After the death of Balavaddi Raju, he was followed by other efficient rulers. It continued till Rani Rudramma. Later there were continuous invasions on the kingdom and the king ended up losing the battle. Vadderas then decided to leave the kingdom and wander in the forests. They decided to do so because the other communities were already disgracing them since they were saved by a 12 year old boy in the first place and now the King who was protecting them is no more they therefore felt that they might face threats again and also they might be discriminated more. Hence they left for forests where no one can recognize them. In this way, they started a nomadic life according to the elders of Vurumodla.

Interestingly, the elders could recall the names of the descendants of Karyavaddi Raju, which are similar to the rulers of Kakatiyas according to the documented history. Kakatiya was a well-known dynasty that ruled the regions of Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and southern parts of Odisha from 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. They are famous for flourishing Telugu and Sanskrit literature and also for their architecture. The interesting part is how these uneducated very old people could recall those names. In this way, their folklore also gives information that they were rulers at

some point in history.

### **Present scenario of Vadderas in Vurumodla**

Vadderas in Vurumodla are either involved in their caste-based occupation or daily wage labour. Both men and women work equally throughout the day. The education level of Vadderas is very low. The younger generation shared with the authors that they are unable to find their caste-based jobs due to the coming of heavy machinery. They are not able to afford that machinery. Hence, they are leaving for cities. They are finding menial jobs through which they are surviving. They all reside in the slum areas and occasionally visit their village. The parents are not happy with their wards leaving the village but they are left with no choice since it is for survival.

The Vadderas of younger generation residing in the village have purchased '*Compressher Bandi*' (Medium sized drilling machine) it is a machine that is used by them for clearing huge boulders. The machine costs in lakhs and they are buying it with the help of finance companies. With this *Compressher Bandi*, they are making a livelihood. The older people indulge in daily wage labour. Both men and women are surviving with the help of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) which they call '*Karuvu Pani*'. The married couple either leaves for the city or tries to survive in the village itself. The children are now being sent to schools.

The Vurumodla Vadderas told the researchers that the members who left for the city do not reveal that they are from this community since they are afraid that they would be discriminated. There are instances that are shared with the researcher about how they are disgraced by the other community people. They shared an incident with the researchers about how their community name was listed on a board that carried the names of the offenders. A Vaddera leader intervened and made the police remove their community name. Even though the Government of Telangana implemented many schemes for the downtrodden communities. Unfortunately, no scheme is present for their welfare.

The people here claim that their community-based occupation is very dangerous and many people have lost their lives while doing it. No person/ NGO/Government came forward to help them out. Instead, they had to pool in the small amount of money they had to help the deceased family.

### **Conclusion**

Vaddera community has a rich culture and history. They perform the festivals of their local deities once in a year and the migrant Vadderas reach their villages on that particular day to celebrate with their fellow men. During the festival they narrate the story of their deity apart from that, they also share the story of Balanagamma with the younger generation. According to them this is the best occasion to share

who they are with the younger generations. The festival is very vibrant and the other communities in the village are also invited. The other communities also have a role in the festival. This is how they maintain harmony with the other people in the village. For a period of two days they all forget about their worries and involve in merry-making. The festivals are conducted by following a process and this process is being continued for many generations.

They are very hard-working in nature. They are highly skilled in their caste-based occupation. Their history and folklore stories survived for many generations and are still being passed on. Even though they are subjected to discrimination and exploitation from the times of the British and also their survival itself is at stake still they stuck to the things they believe in. There is no intervention from the government for their up-liftment. Their caste-based occupation is being threatened due to heavy machinery which is being owned by the rich classes.

They are a denotified tribe and in southern states, they were placed in Backward Classes because of which they can neither claim the reservation they deserve nor are they being protected by the constitution. In the case of Vadderas in Vurumodla, the younger generation is leaving their caste-based occupation and are surviving in the big cities through menial jobs. Due to their struggle for survival, they are unable to fight for their own rights. The younger generation is moving away from the village. Therefore, there is a chance that they might lose their rich history and traditions due to the struggle for survival in the big cities. The authors hope that through their study, some policy initiative will be designed to help this disadvantaged community.

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