

Kunavaram - Tribal Villages on the Hills

In the last two lessons we studied about village life on the coastal plains and on the dry plateau region. In this lesson we will study village life in a very different region – the hills. You may have visited some hills or you may be living there. Can you describe a hill? What do you find there? What kind of things people do there?



Fig: 6.1 Terrain of Bison Hills

The Bison Hills

Bison hills are spread in both Khammam and West Godavari districts along either banks of the river Godavari. The two tributaries of the Godavari - Shabari, Sileru

flow from these hills. Let us locate these hills on the map below (6.2).

Many tribal communities live in the hill tracts of this region. The Konda Reddys are a tribe of the region with their own special life style. They are scattered in several



Fig: 6.4. Clearing amid forests

When we climbed the hills we saw thick forests combined with big patches of cleared land. These clearances are the fields which lie scattered on the hills. As you can see the land here is not at all level, but very sloping. It is very rocky and the soil has lots of stones and rocks. The colour of the soil is red.

We talked to the people to find out about their lives. Since they spoke Telugu, it was easy for us to talk to them.

Podu

Konda Reddys grow crops in a distinct way called 'Podu'. Podu is an ancient practice in the hilly regions. It is also called shifting cultivation or *jhum* cultivation. It is practiced widely in Chattisgarh and the north eastern states like Arunachal Pradesh. In this method, the people clear a patch of forest and burn it. They grow crops on these fields for a few years and

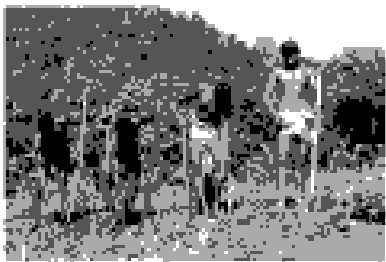


Fig: 6.5. Dibbling seeds with a digging stick.

allow it to rest and grow forest again. Then they clear a new patch of land and grow crop for a few years on it.

In the Bison Hills, it stops raining around November. So the Reddys use their axes to clear patches of forest in the month of December. They allow the logs of wood to lie and dry on the field for a few months. They set fire to them in April or May just before it rains. By the time the rains come the ground is covered with ashes. When the rains arrive in June they dibble seeds with the help of digging sticks. Or they sow seeds of many crops together by broadcast method (throwing on the ground). They do not use plough or hoe nor do they use any fertiliser.

One reason for not using plough on the hill slopes is that it will lead to very easy run off of the top soil and make the soil infertile.

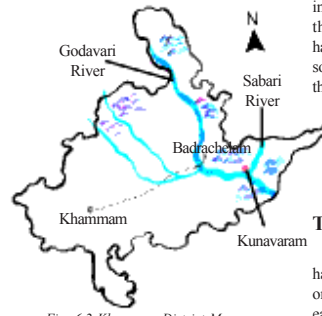


Fig: 6.2 Khammam District Map

mandals of Khammam district such as Kunavaram, Chintur, Valairpadu, Kukkurur, Dammapeta, Aswaraopet, etc.

We set out to learn about the lives of Konda Reddys dwelling on the hills in and around Kunavaram. It is situated on the confluence of the river Shabari which flows down from the North and joins the Godavari. From Kunavaram we reached Bhagavanpuram village which is located at the foot of the hills. A foot path from this village led us up the hills. The path was very steep, narrow and slippery; an accidental fall would have landed us



Fig: 6.3 The path from the Tribal settlement

in the valley. We climbed on this path for three to four hours and reached the habitation of the tribals. On the way we saw some women carrying bamboo baskets to the market in the plains below.

Terrain of Bison hills

These tribes live in very small habitations – about five to ten huts in one place. The habitations are far from each other - separated by three to five kilometers.

- Look at the photographs of the terrain of Bison Hills. Compare it with the terrain you saw around Penamakuru and Salakamcheruvu.

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Fig: 6.6: Crops growing on Podu fields

These tribes build *manche* and guard the fields from wild animals and birds till the harvest is over in December. The principal crop of this tribe is Jowar (*jonna*). The major crops raised by them are maize (*nokka jonna*), tubers (*dumpalu*), millets (*samalu, korralu, sode, adusulu*); pulses like red gram (*kandulu*), green gram (*pesarlu*); vegetables like Brinjal (*vanga*); sesamum (*nuvvulu*), chillies (*pachi mirapa*); etc. They grow mixed crops without any irrigation, depending fully on rains. This normally gives them enough food for about six months.

After cultivating the podu land for 3 or 4 years, they leave it for 3 or 5 years and cultivate another patch of land. By then the forest grows again on the old land and they cultivate it again in the same way.

On an average in early times each family cleared the forest over 2 to 2 1/2 acres of land. The average yield of jowar per acre of podu field is 250 kilograms. So each family harvested about 600 kilograms of jowar, besides 150 to 250 kilograms of millets. However,

now this area has been reduced to about one to one and half acres which has led to reduced availability of food grains.

- Why do you think the area of podu has reduced in recent years?
- Do you know of any other method of raising crops on slopes of hills?
- In what way does the ash help in the growing of the crops?
- Do wild animals attack farms in your area too? What do people do to protect the crops?

Vegetable garden in the back yard

The huts are located in a large area. Around the house they make bamboo fencing. They level the land and add organic matter to make the soil fertile. This is their kitchen garden. This is a major source of their food. In kitchen garden, maize, vegetables like beans, gourd, chillies, etc. are grown.



Fig: 6.7. Manche in Podu Fields

Forest products

As we saw above the produce from the podu lands or from the kitchen gardens is not enough for the families to survive throughout the year. Therefore collection of forest produce and hunting play a vital role in the lives of these people. The forest is a great storehouse of food for them and they depend upon the forest for its produce throughout the year.



Fig: 6.8. Hunting in the forest with bows

The tribal calendar is marked by various seasons for collecting various edible fruits, tubers, nuts, green leaves, and even for hunting small animals.



Fig: 6.9&10. Collecting bamboo shoots

Except for a few months during and after harvest, Konda Reddy women and children are engaged in collection of edible forest produce for subsistence. Two important forest products collected by them are honey and bamboo shoots. They collect honey from huge trees which they climb with the help of single pole bamboo ladder. Tender bamboo shoots called 'kari kommulu' from tips of the bamboo bushes are collected. The shoots are cooked after the upper covering layers are removed. This is considered a tasty delicacy.

Another important source of food for the families is the juice of Caryota palm (*Jilugu*), especially in summer. Whenever they or their domestic animals fall ill, they treat them with medicinal plants collected from the forest. They rear goats, sheep, pigs, dogs and chicken.

We can see that the tribals have a very intimate knowledge of the forest and its products and use them effectively to supplement the food grown in the Podu fields and in their kitchen gardens.

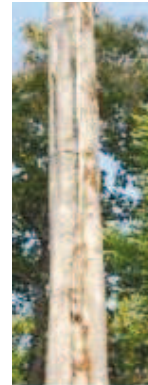


Fig: 6.11A & B: Bamboo ladder to climb tall trees.

They sell all these in weekly market i.e., *santha*. With the money they earn by selling their produce, they purchase their daily needs, clothes and other requirements.

Drinking water

There are no rivers or wells in this area. It is very difficult to dig wells in the rocky hills. They fetch water from natural springs like the one shown in the picture for drinking water etc. Or they go down to small streams.

- ◆ What forest products do you eat?
- ◆ Have you collected any edible thing from the forest? If so describe your experiences.



Fig: 6.12 Spring - carrying water to home.



Discussion with Gangamma - a Tribal woman



Fig: 6.13 Gangamma, a Tribal woman

Q: Gangamma tell us about your basket weaving work.

Gangamma: I make 10 baskets in 2 hours. Each basket is sold at Rs. 20. We use the money to buy our requirements in the *santha*.

Q: What else do you do?

Gangamma: Podu cultivation. But last year the crops failed. Now we are facing problems. So we take ration rice from Katur ration shop. We also hunt birds, rabbits, etc, and sometimes wild animals.

Q: What do you collect from the forest?

Gangamma: We collect honey. We consume some of it and sell the rest in the market.

Bamboo

Bamboo is abundant in the forest. They form part and parcel of the lives of Tribals. Apart from using bamboo themselves, they also make baskets, winnows, chicken coops etc and take them to the *santha* for sale.

In many areas these tribes are approached by Paper Mill agents to cut and supply bamboo for the mills. This is one of the major additional employment



Fig: 6.15. Taking baskets to sell

opportunities available for them which brings them cash income. Initially the payments were very low but these have increased gradually in the last few years.



Fig: 6.14. Household objects of bamboo and drums.



Fig: 6.16. Bringing bamboo across the stream

Houses and habitation

As the picture below shows, they live in small houses built of mud, bamboo and thatch. The house has large open space on all the sides. Front or adjacent sides of the house are used for bamboo work and keeping the animals. Behind the huts we can see the kitchen garden. There is no electricity in this area.

Each settlement has about seven or eight huts, with the huts next to each other. There are nearly 10 such settlements on the hill top. Altogether 78 families are living here and the total population is 528. All the tribes live on the hill tops. They are all scattered in small villages. These settlements are not permanent. In case there is an epidemic or any other reason they

abandon the settlement and build their houses elsewhere.

The family is very important to these tribes as all members of a family work together on the fields, while hunting or even working in the forest. While men and women together participate in all types of work, men do more work relating to cattle rearing and agriculture while women and children attend to gathering food from the forest and basket weaving.

Customs

They worship Gods of Nature and every family has got their *Kula devatha* i.e. family God/ Goddess. They post a long pole in front of the house and tie some neem branches to it. They call it as Muthyalamma and worship it. Only men of the village go to forest and offer prayers to their God in the forest. The festivals too represent the changes in the season. Of the celebrations of the tribals, the *Mamidi panduga* (festival of mango) is the most important one. They celebrate *gongura panduga* in September and offer vegetables to their deity and eat it as *prasadam*. Next important festival is the *pachha panduga* (Green festival). All major activities like agriculture, harvest,



Fig: 6.17. Hut made of bamboo and thatch.

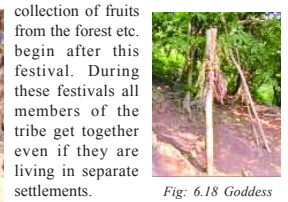


Fig: 6.18 Goddess of Muthyalamma

The Future of Konda Reddys

These hill tribes are very few in number but they follow a pattern of life which is very ancient. It is based on disturbing the environment the least compared to other uses of the land like plough agriculture, mining, factory production or towns. They do not destroy the forests they use. Even the forests they clear for agriculture is allowed to regenerate after a few years. They possess very intimate knowledge of the forest environment and intensive use of the fruits of the forest – again without disturbing it. At the same time we should remember that for people to lead this kind of life they need to have large forest land and be left undisturbed to use it.

- ♦ We had talked about the sustainability of agriculture in the plateau village. Compare the sustainability of livelihoods practiced by the people of the three villages.

Considering the fact that the needs of these are few and the richness of the forests in which they live, it may appear that they may continue like this forever. However, it is not to be so. In fact for a long time their livelihoods have been repeatedly threatened. The forest officials try to stop the podu cultivation. Due to felling of trees and over exploitation of the bamboo by the paper mills which need daily supply of large quantities of bamboo, the forests are getting depleted constantly. Now the most

serious issue for them is the Polavaram dam project. The project is planned to be built across the Godavari near Polavaram. The waters that will be stored in the dam will be used to irrigate the region between Godavari and Krishna Deltas and Krishna Delta villages. However, they will also submerge a large number of villages in Kunavaram mandal. It becomes impossible for the Konda Reddys to continue to live on the hills.



Fig: 6.20: Splitting bamboo for basket making.

Key words

Podu
Tribe
Bamboo
Kitchen garden
Forest products
Customs

- ♦ Find out more about the Polavaram Project and also how it will benefit and how it will submerge villages. Discuss the pros and cons of such projects in the class.



Fig: 6.19. Market in a Konda Reddy Village.

Improve your learning

1. What are the various ways in which the tribals are dependent upon the forests around them?
2. List out various means of living of these tribals.
3. Why do you think they grow so many crops?
4. What will happen if they have to grow crops on the same field every year?
5. Compare the nature of the fields in the three villages you studied to bring out their similarities and differences.
6. Compare the work done by the families of the tribals throughout the year with the work done by the families of Plains and Plateau villagers.
7. Do you think it is important to preserve the lifestyle of the tribals? Give your reasons.
8. Describe the cultural activities of these tribes.
9. Locate the following places in Andhra Pradesh Map
 - (a) Khammam
 - (b) Bison Hills
 - (c) River Godavari