

Penugolu - A Village on the Hills



In the previous two chapters, we studied about village life in the Krishna delta and on the Telangana plateau region. In this chapter, we will study village life in a very different region – the hills. You may have visited some hills or you may be living on them. Can you describe a hill? What do you find there? What kind of things do people do there?



Fig. 5.1: Hills around Penugolu Village

Eastern Ghats

Telangana Plateau is a part of the Deccan Plateau, that is marked by the Eastern Ghats on one corner. Eastern Ghats are located on the eastern boarder of Jayashankar district. The hill ranges in Telangana are part of the Western Ghats. Identify the above regions in the district map of Telangana. These hills further spread to states like Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha.

Most people living in the hills belong to different tribal communities. These are: Savara, Konda Dora, Gadaba, Gond, Manne Dora, Mukha Dora and Koya. These indigenous people have their own unique cultural heritage. Many of these communities continue to depend on collection of the forest produce & hunting for their livelihood. Their knowledge about the region, the forest and its produce is really vast and deep. However, these communities face many disruptions today



Map 1: Location of Penugolu Village in Jayashankar District

that are threatening their way of life. We would discuss some of these issues in this chapter.

Penugolu village in Wazeed mandal lies on hills that are on the banks of River Godavari. (See map 1) The community that live here are Koyas. Koya means “a good person living on the hills”. They speak Koya language and this community is spread out on the hills upto the adjoining states surrounding them such as Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh. At the same time, many Koyas have migrated away from the hills and now live in Adilabad, Karimnagar, Warangal and some parts of East Godavari. They do not anymore speak Koya language but have adopted Telugu.

This village is surrounded by hills (guttalu) that have names like Karre gutta or Nallagutta - Chattisgarh in the North, Vankamamidi gutta in the south, Kallu Kuntala gutta in the east and

Chinna Kummari Lanka, Pedda Kummari Lanka in the west. Locate these hills on the map above.

Wazeed is situated on the confluence of the stream Nallandevi Vagu (from Nallagutta) that flows down from the north and joins the Godavari. From Wazeed, we reached Gummadi Doddi village which is

located at the foot of the hills. A path from this village led us up the hills. The path was very steep, narrow and slippery. We also saw the famous Bogatha water fall near Cheekupalli on the way. As we climbed the hills, we saw thick forests and occasional big patches of cleared land. These clearances are the fields that lie scattered across the hills. These fields with red soil were on the slopes and not very fertile. There were plenty of stones and pebbles. . It is located 20 kilometers away from mandal head quarter at Wazeedu.



Fig. 5.2: Bogatha Water falls

Podu

Koyas grow crops using a distinct technique called 'Podu'. Podu is a



Fig 5.3: A field near the forest

traditional practice of farming in hilly regions. This is called “shifting agriculture” or “Jhum cultivation”. It is also practiced by tribes like Konda Reddy. This practice of shifting cultivation is also done in states like Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Arunachal Pradesh etc.

Each village has a specified area or hill that they can use for farming. Within this area, people clear a patch of forest and burn it. Then, they grow crops on these fields for a few years. After that, they leave that patch of land and allow the forest to grow again. Meanwhile, they move to another site in that area where they clear another patch of forest land to grow crops for a few years. This way, their farms keep shifting every few years and they return to these plots after many years.

In the hills, it stops raining around November. The Koyas then use their axes to clear patches of forest in the month of December. They allow the logs of wood to lie there and dry on the field for a few months. These are then burnt in April or May just before it rains. When the rainy season starts, the ground is covered with ashes. With the arrival of rain in June, people dribble seeds with the help of digging sticks. This way, they sow seeds of many crops together by broadcast method – spreading the seeds on the ground. They do not use plough or hoe nor do they use any fertiliser.

One of the reasons for not using plough on the hill slopes is that this would loosen the soil too much. This would lead to easy run off of the top soil during the rains. This would make the fields infertile. It is the top soil that is most fertile of the field. Farmers want the ashes and dead leaves to



Fig. 5.4: Dibbling seeds with a digging stick, a photograph from 1940

remain on the land and not get washed away. The main crops of the area are Jowar (*jonnalalu*) *maize* (*mokka jonna*), tubers (*dumpalu*), millets (*samalu*, *korralu*, *sode*, *adusulu*); sesamum (*nuvvulu*), pulses like red gram (*kandulu*), green gram (*pesarlu*); vegetables like Brinjal (*vanga*); chillies (*pachimirapa*); *gongura* etc. They grow mixed crops without any irrigation. The total produce normally provides them with enough food for about six months.

Since these fields are close to the forests, they easily attract animals and birds of the region. The Koyas build *manche* to guard their fields until December.

We read earlier that farming is done on a particular plot of land for a few years and in another one for the next few years. In olden days, on an average, each family cleared 2 to 2.5 acres of forest land. The average yield of *jowar* per acre of *podu* field is 250 kilograms. So, each family harvested about 600 kilograms of *jowar* apart from 150 to 250 kilograms of small millets. Earlier, larger forest areas were available in the hills. But now, the area available for *podu* has decreased to about one to one and half acres. This has led to reduced availability of food grains for each family. At the same time, people are forced to come back to the same plot of land earlier than before because the forest area has decreased. The rotation cycle has also become smaller so the soil is not able to recover its fertility as earlier.

- ♦ What are the reasons for the reduction of *podu* area 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

From a distance, we could notice that the houses in this village had neat bamboo fences around the backyard with leveled land. This was quite unlike the stony and sloping agricultural fields. This back-yard provided a space for a small kitchen garden. In this small plot, they planted a few vegetables like beans, gourd, chillies and fences had climbers like pumpkin. At times poultry was also kept within these fences. Some of them rear goats, sheep, cattle and dogs.



Fig. 5.5: Kitchen garden fence and the houses



Fig. 5.6: Taking cattle to graze

Minor Forest products

When we spoke with people at the village we realised that grain and vegetables produced in the podu lands or their backyard is insufficient for the families to survive throughout the year. Hence, collection of forest produce and hunting plays a vital role in their livelihood. The forest is a great storehouse and, over hundreds of years, the people have identified all the various available edible food and sources of medicine. The people in this village depend upon the forest throughout the year. The tribal calendar is marked by various seasons for various edible fruits, tubers, nuts, green leaves and even for hunting small animals. For any illnesses, either for humans or animals, their knowledge of the medicinal plants collected from the forest provides the remedies.

Except for a few months during and after harvest, tribal women and children are engaged in collection of edible forest produce. The two important forest products that they collect are honey and bamboo shoots. They collect honey from trees, climbing them with the help of a single pole ladder. Tender bamboo shoots called ‘*kari*

kommulu’ are collected from the tips of the bamboo bushes. The shoots are cooked after the outer layers are removed. This is a great delicacy. Another important source of food for the families is the juice of palm tree, (thati

kallu) especially in summers. All the members of a family work together on the fields, in the forest and in hunting. Men do more work related to cattle rearing and agriculture. Women and children attend to gathering food from the forest and basket weaving.

Some of the forest products are also sold in the weekly market - Santha. For example, Mahua seeds are a major item that they sell in the market. With the money they earn by selling these products, they purchase items of daily needs like clothes and other requirements.

- ◆ What forest products do you eat? Make a list.
- ◆ Have you collected any edible things from the forest? If so share your experiences.

Drinking water

There are many natural springs that provide drinking water to the people in this village. Then, there are streams that flow through the hills and later join rivers like Sabari or Godavari. It is hard to dig wells on the hills because of the rocks. The water at the springs lasts throughout the year,

though some of these natural springs do dry up in summer. Streams are seasonal and last for a few months after the rains. For people in this village, the spring is at a distance of about 30 minutes walk.

Bamboo

As we know, bamboo is abundant in the forests. Apart from it being a food source, bamboo is used to build houses, fences etc. People also make baskets, winnows, chicken coops etc. with it and sell them in the santha.

Paper Mills also have the right to collect bamboo from the forest. There are agents who employ people in the village to cut and supply bamboo for the mills. This provides some earning opportunities to them. Initially, the wages were very low but they have increased slowly over the last few years. These wage workers go collect for bamboo after the cropping season. They earn about 150 Rs. per day.

- ♦ How is the use of bamboo in tribal life different from that of the paper mill?

Houses and habitation

We have seen that the houses in Penugolu are mostly built of mud, bamboo and thatch. There is a separate space to keep the animals and grow vegetables in the kitchen garden around the house. There are fences around the house to protect these crops and animals. Each house is at a little distance from the other.

Houses in Penugolu are at the top of the hills. There were 32 families living here



Fig. 5.7: Carrying water from the spring

and the total population is 124. These settlements are not permanent. In case, there is an epidemic or any other reason, they can quickly abandon the settlement and build their houses elsewhere.

- ♦ What similarities and differences do you think, are there between the settlements in plateaus and hills?

Customs

The tribal people in Penugolu worship Gods of Nature. The festivals follow the changes in the season. They worship stone idol. They also worship Burra (round shaped dried bottle gourd) and Thadu under the

Fig 5.8 : Hut made of bamboo and thatch



tamarind tree. They call it Muthyalamma. They celebrate yellanampadam (bhumi pooja), Kodathala panduga (peddalapanduga), Bhimini panduga (festival of vipa poovu). They celebrate Kodathala panduga in September in which they offer vegetables to their deity and then eat them. All major activities like sowing, harvest, collection of fruits from the forest etc. begin after these festivals. During these festivals, all the members of the tribe gather even if they are living in separate settlements.

The Future of Koyas

Even though the hill tribes are very few in number, but they have been following a pattern of life from ancient times. They have a right to their way of life. They do not disturb the environment as compared to modern agriculture. The forests they clear for agriculture are taken care of, so they automatically regenerate after some years. However, with limited forest land available to them now, their way of life is under constant threat. Due to constant felling of trees and over exploitation of bamboo by the paper mills which need daily supply of large quantities of bamboo, the forests are getting depleted. In fact, for a long time the livelihood of tribal people has been repeatedly threatened. The forest officials try to stop the podu cultivation.



Fig 5.9 : Gamanu - place of worship

- ◆ We had discussed about the sustainability of agriculture in the plateau village. Compare the sustainability of livelihoods practiced by the people of the three villages.
- ◆ What steps could be taken to ensure that the Koyas have a right to their way of life?

The tribal people possess very intimate knowledge of the fruits of the forest and the forest environment. Considering the fact that the needs of these people are few and the richness of the forests in which they live is immense, it would appear to be in great harmony with nature. Should they not have a right to do so?

School and other such facilities available in the villages are limited. There is just one school, Girijana Primary School. The nearest high school as well hospital are at Wazedu, the Mandal headquarters, that is about 20 k.m. from their village.



Fig 5.10 : Path way leading to Penugolu village

Keywords

Podu

Tribe

Bamboo

Kitchen garden

Forest products

Improve your learning

1. What are the various ways in which the Koyas are dependent upon the forests around them?
2. List out various means of living in a hill region.
3. Why do the Koyas move from one hill to another for growing crops?
4. Compare the nature of the fields in the three villages that you studied and bring out their similarities and differences.
5. Read the various sub-headings in the last three chapters. Fill the following table with information regarding various aspects of the three villages. (Add more rows if necessary – write “no information” if you cannot find similar headings)



Sub headings/Headings	Hill village	Plateau village	Plain village

6. Your village/town is currently located in _____ type of land form. Imagine that your village is located in a different type of land form and write about it.

Discussion: What will happen, if there are no trees? Discuss, its effect and our responsibility.