

## XXIX

### ERAKALA

Erakalá, Kaikádi, Korwáh—a vagrant gypsy tribe, bearing an evil reputation as professional criminals and infesting the country between the Krishna and the Narbada rivers. For the purposes of crime, the country is divided into districts and sub-districts, to each of which a gang is sent, headed by a *naik*, whose authority over his gang is absolute and who is always regarded with extreme reverence. Ostensibly, the men of the tribe work as basket and mat-makers, day-labourers and musicians, while the women wander from village to village as fortune-tellers and tatoers.

In physical appearance, the Erakalás seem to be non-Aryans. Their irregular features, dark complexion and coarse, unkempt hair may lead to the conclusion that they belong to the aborigines of Southern India. They speak a mongrel dialect, which appears to be a mixture of Támil, Telugu and Canarese, with a preponderance of the first. Their huts, generally funnel shaped, are made of date mats and twigs, and are carried from place to place on the backs of donkeys. The men are scantily clothed, wearing a piece of cloth about the loins and a dirty old turban on the head. The women wear *saris*, after the manner of the Telugu females, and have brass bangles on both arms. Their extremely untidy appearance has become proverbial, so that a very dirty girl, with dishevelled locks, is called a "Kaikádeen."

Widely distributed as the tribe is, it bears different names in different localities, being called Erakalá in Telugu, Kaikádi in Marathi and Korwáh or Kurwi in Carnatic districts. The Erakalás derive their name from *Eruká*—knowledge or acquaintance—as the females of the tribe profess to be great experts in fortune-telling, which they have adopted as a profession. The derivations of the names Kaikádi and Korwáh are obscure.

**Origin.**—Regarding the origin of the tribe, several stories are current. A legendary account tells how Renuká, the wife of Jamdagni and mother of Parshurám, while bathing naked in the sacred waters of the Ganges, was beheld by a Dher and, being thereby deprived of the power which she had possessed in virtue of her chaste and meritorious life, failed to turn the holy sand into pots to carry water home. Jamdagni, observing the failure, and suspecting his wife to be guilty of a liaison with the Dher, had them both beheaded by his son Parshurám, and thus the pure-minded and innocent woman succumbed to the rage of a jealous husband. Parshurám implored his father to suspend his wrath, and to show mercy to his mother by restoring her to life. At his entreaty, the sage relented, and desired Renuká's trunk and head to be brought in contact. Parshurám, in his haste, adapted the Dher's head to the trunk of his mother, which so enraged the irascible sage that he cursed his son and doomed him to be the procreator of the vile race of Kaikádis. Renuká, who came to life with a male head, became, under the name of Ellamá, the patron deity of the tribe.

**Internal Structure.**—Owing to the unsettled state of the tribe, and the wide range of country over which it is scattered, its internal structure is extremely intricate and complicated. A number of sub-tribes into which the tribe is divided, is given below :—

Erakalá sub-tribes.

- (1) Kunchal (brushes).
- (2) Pungi or Pámb (blow-gourd).
- (3) Butti (basket).
- (4) Mide.
- (5) Gampá (basket).
- (6) Bidigal.
- (7) Tattá.
- (8) Badigi.
- (9) Balári.

Korwáh sub-tribes.

- (1) Kunchal.
- (2) Pungi.
- (3) Butti.

- (4) Kallá.
- (5) Belgar.
- (6) Wájantri (musician).
- (7) Páthar (prostitute).

Kaikádi sub-tribes.

- (1) Kunchi.
- (2) Pungi.
- (3) Kothi (monkey).
- (4) Deccani.
- (5) Belgar.
- (6) Sunái (musicians).
- (7) Kut Kaikádi (prostitutes).
- (8) Kámáthi.

It will be seen at a glance that one and the same name represents two or more groups which are endogamous. Thus, the name 'Kunchal,' denotes the three sub-tribes, Kunchal Erakalá, Kunchal Korwáh, and Kunchal Kaikádi, the members of which do not intermarry. This may be due to the reluctance of the members of the same sub-tribe to intermarry, when at a distance from one another. It will also be seen that the sub-tribes are functional groups, following the occupations indicated by their names.

Kunchal Clans are engaged in making brushes for weavers' looms and snares for catching game.

Buttin Clans are a wandering tribe, making baskets and children's toys from the twigs of the wild date palm, telling fortunes and selling medicinal roots.

Pungi Clans (Pambal) are snake-charmers and exhibitors, jugglers and showmen. They travel about playing on the *pungi* or blow-gourd. They are suspected by the police of being gang robbers and burglars and of passing base metals for gold.

Belgar Clans own donkeys which they let on hire. They deal in betel-nuts.

Sunái Kaikádi or Wájantri Korwáh are reported to be habitual criminals, highway robbers, dakaits and burglars. It is said that they have adopted crime as an hereditary profession and are under the strict surveillance of the police.

Kut Kaikádi or Páthur Korwáh earn their livelihood by purchasing girls and prostituting them. They live in towns and are reported to kidnap and sell children.

Besides these there are the Bidigal Erakalás, who are lime-carriers; the Gampal Erakalás, who are basket-weavers; the Kothi Kaikádis, monkey-showers; the Bellári Erakalás, who make slings for hanging up cooking utensils; and several other sub-tribes.

Each of the sub-tribes is divided into two exogamous groups: the Korwáh and Erakalá tribes into—(1) Káwádi and (2) Sátpádi, and the Kaikádi tribes into—(1) Jádhav and (2) Gáikwád. The latter names are evidently borrowed from the Maratha Kunbis, probably to suit the community among whom the Kaikádis dwelt. The section name goes by the male side. A man cannot marry a woman of his own section. Thus, a Sátpádi may not marry a Sátpádi girl, but he can marry into the Káwádi. The marriage of two sisters to the same man is permitted, provided the elder is married first. The marriage of first cousins is not allowed, exception being made in favour of a man marrying the daughter of his father's sister. According to a custom prevalent among the tribe, every man has a right to claim the first two daughters of his sister, as wives for his sons. If, being sonless, or for any other reason, he is obliged to renounce his claim, his right to the girls is valued and the money paid to him by the parents of the girls before they are married. The bastards among the tribe are not allowed to marry the legitimates and have, consequently, formed a separate class divided into exogamous sections: (1) Kotádi and (2) Mánpádi. But the offspring of bastards are not illegitimate, and must marry the legitimate members of the community.

The Erakalás admit into their caste, members of any caste higher to them in social standing.

**Marriage.**—Marriage is either infant or adult. A price is paid for the bride, which varies in amount from Rs. 14 to Rs. 196 (fourteen fourteens), rising by a multiple of fourteen, according to the means of the bridegroom's parents. If the full amount (Rs. 196) is agreed upon, the maternal uncle of the girl claims Rs. 70 (five fourteens) as his share (which is, however, liable to vary as the

bride-price) which must be paid to him prior to marriage. The bride-price may be reckoned either in cash or in asses. Half the amount at least must be paid before marriage, to enable the girl's father to pay off her maternal uncle and to make wedding preparations. The balance may be liquidated after marriage, either in a lump sum, or by instalments. Sexual license before marriage is tolerated and in the event of an unmarried girl becoming pregnant, or having children, her lover is called upon by the caste *Pancháyat* to take her to wife. Husbands may even be obtained for women who have had children before marriage by members of the higher castes. Courtship is said to prevail and girls, when of mature age, are married to men of their own choice. In fulfilment of vows, girls are dedicated to temples and sometimes to trees, the ceremonial of dedication consisting of the girl's marriage, with all the usual rites, to the temple image, or to the tree which represents the bridegroom. Such girls subsequently become prostitutes. The Pathur Gorwah (Erakalá prostitutes) wed their girls to a dagger before initiating them into their occupation.

On an Erakalá youth attaining a marriageable age, his parents look about for a suitable bride. A selection having been made, and the proposal having been accepted by the girl's parents, a day is fixed for the performance of the *Agu Madu* (betrothal) ceremony. On the appointed day, the parents of the boy, with their relatives, set out for the girl's house, taking with them a new mat of date palm. On their arrival, they spread the mat in the open, before the house, and on this mat the bride's father and the members of the caste *Pancháyat* (council) are seated. The question of the bride-price is opened and discussed and on its final settlement (to the satisfaction of both the parties) eight rupees are paid, as earnest money, to the bride's father. Liquor is ordered at the expense of the bridegroom's father and distributed to the assembly, the first cup being presented to the girl's father, whose drinking of it symbolises the ratification of the alliance, which can on no account be broken.

On the wedding morning, a marriage shed is erected at the bride's house and the betrothed pair, in their own houses, are smeared five times with a paste of turmeric and oil and are then

bathed. Towards evening, the parents of the girl, the father carrying on his head a new earthen pot and the mother holding in her hand a lighted lamp, proceed in procession to the village tank or river. A twig of the *pipal* tree (*Ficus religiosa*) with five offshoots, previously concealed under water, is searched for and, when found, is worshipped and placed in the earthen jar. The jar is then filled with water and carried back to the marriage booth, where it is kept covered, by the bride's mother, with a lighted lamp, which is not allowed to go out so long as the marriage lasts. At the auspicious hour appointed, the bridegroom, dagger in hand, is taken in pomp to the bride's house where, on arrival, he is joined by the bride coming from the inner part of the house. The couple, dressed in white, are seated facing the sanctified pot, the bride to the left of her husband, on squares of rice drawn on a date palm mat spread underneath the bower. The consent of the caste *Pancháyat* to their wedding having been solicited and secured, the bride's father, who officiates as priest, fastens the ends of their garments in a knot and ties *tila* (one rupee) in the turban of the bridegroom. This tribal ceremonial, which forms the binding and essential portion of the marriage ceremony, is followed by certain Hindu rituals, *viz.*, *Talwál* or the throwing of turmeric-coloured rice on the wedded pair, first by their parents and then by the wedding guests, and *Pusti Mittal* or the placing of a black bead necklace round the girl's neck and toe rings on her toes. The ceremony continues until the small hours of the morning, the bridal pair sitting up all the while. Next morning, the married couple are bathed, auspicious lights are waved round their faces by married females and milk and curds are given them to drink. *Dandya* and *Wadibium* bring the celebration to a close. Among the Korwás, a curious ceremony is performed on the second day of the wedding. The bride is concealed in a neighbour's house by her mother and the bridegroom starting out on foot, seeks her out and carries her home in his arms.

**Widow-Marriage.**—A widow is generally required to marry her late husband's younger brother, even though he be younger than herself. Her choice of a second husband is not, however, fettered and she may marry an outsider, provided he does not come within the

prohibited degrees of relationship. In either case she forfeits all rights to her late husband's property. The ritual in vogue at a widow marriage is simple and consists in dressing the widow in new clothes, putting bangles on her arms and taking her home. A feast to the relatives closes the ceremony.

**Divorce.**—Divorce is allowed on the ground of the wife's barrenness, or unchastity, or disobedience, and is effected by turning her out of the house in the presence of the caste *Pancháyat*. She is permitted to re-marry by the same ceremony as a widow and, in case she re-marries, her second husband is compelled to refund to the first the amount, or a portion of the amount, which the latter paid to her parents as bride-price.

**Inheritance.**—The Erakalás very seldom resort to the courts of law, but have their disputes settled by the caste *Pancháyats*. In matters of inheritance, they are governed mostly by tribal customs of their own. In the absence of any male issue, daughters are said to inherit and the fact that a girl is dedicated to a temple and has become a prostitute, does not debar her from inheriting the ancestral property.

**Child-Birth.**—A singular custom, of great antiquity, which still survives among the Erakalás, is worth recording. The moment labour begins, the woman communicates the fact to her husband, who immediately retires to a dark room and lies on a bed, covering himself with his wife's clothes. When the child is born it is placed by the side of the father, who has his teeth daubed with dentifrice and his eyelashes smeared with lamp-black, while all the prescribed medicines are given to him and he is not allowed to leave his bed for three days, during which period he is regarded as being impure. No attention, on the other hand, is shown to the mother, who lies neglected on the ground. She is given no medicine and no food except bread. The Erakalás tell the following story to account for this singular practice. In days of yore, the donkeys of a certain Erakalá used to wander into fields and do considerable damage to the crops. Thrice was the Erakalá punished for this offence by the owners of the farms. On the fourth occasion, the damage wrought by the beasts to the crop was so heavy, that the Erakalá, afraid of

a sound beating, took to bed, and turned the occasion of the confinement of his wife to his advantage, by declaring that he was being treated for her. It was to this event that the Erakalás ascribe the introduction among them of couvade, known among savage tribes.

**Religion.**—The religion of the Erakalás is animism, overlaid by a very thin layer of popular Hinduism. Their favourite and characteristic deity is Elammá, represented in various forms and worshipped on Fridays and Tuesdays with offerings of flowers and sweetmeats. Among the Korwás, the goddess is represented by an earthen pot set up in a hut specially built to serve as her sanctuary. Early on a Tuesday morning, the Korwá female who is selected to officiate as priestess of the divinity bathes and fills the sacred pot with water. Incense is then burnt, flowers presented, auspicious lights, placed in a shallow dish of palm twigs, solemnly waved and prayers offered in front of the goddess. The water contained in the sacred pot is then distributed and with this water cakes are prepared and eaten by the votaries. Pigs, fowls and goats are sacrificed to the deity on special occasions, the slaughtered animals furnishing a feast to her devotees after the sacrifice.

Among the other animistic deities that are honoured by the tribe, may be mentioned, Pochammá, the goddess of smallpox, and Bálammá, a deity of vaguely defined functions, who are appeased with the offerings of ewes; while to Máhálaxmi, the goddess who presides over cholera, are offered pigs and fowls on the *Dassera* Holiday (September). At the worship of Bhaváni, a *gondhal* (sacred dance) is performed and ewes are sacrificed on her altar.

The Erakalás are a spirit-haunted and ghost-ridden people and ascribe every disease or malady, every misfortune or calamity, to the action of some malevolent spirit, or of some troubled ancestral ghost. The influence of evil spirits is averted by sacrificing to them such animals as goats, pigs, fowls, &c. The services of an Erakalá priestess are called in to identify and to lay the ghosts of departed ancestors. When a ghost is to be appeased, the following ceremony is performed:—Some *jawári* is spread on the ground and a small earthen pot, surmounted by a lighted lamp, is placed upon it. The priestess, having bathed and seated herself, facing the

lamp, becomes possessed and goes on playing on a musical instrument called a *tingari* (a sort of fiddle), singing, one by one, the names of all the deceased relatives, until the flickering flame of the lamp becomes steady. The image of the deceased person, whose name has steadied the flame, is embossed upon a silver plate which, being hung round the neck of the sufferer, is supposed to cure him. Garlands made of pieces of leather and *cowrie* shells are also worn in the name of Ellammá by men and women to ward off evil influences proceeding from spirits and ghosts.

In addition to these elemental deities and departed ancestors, the Hindu gods Hanumán, Rájanná and Mahádeva are also honoured, though in a scanty fashion, by the tribe, more particularly by those who have given up their wandering habits and settled down in villages and towns. Brahmans have not yet been introduced either for ceremonial or religious functions which are discharged by their tribal priests. The growing influence of Hinduism may be traced to the fact that a few of the Erakalás have divided themselves, like the Hindu castes of Telingana, into Nám dháris and Vibhutidháris.

**Disposal of the Dead.**—The dead are usually burnt, but occasionally buried in a lying posture, with the head pointing to the south. It is said that the members of the Sátpádi section bury their dead and those of the Káwádi burn them. The ashes are either left at the place of cremation or thrown into a running stream. Mourning is observed for five days, during which time the principal mourner is regarded as unclean and abstains from flesh. On the fifth day after death, a swine is killed, its flesh is cooked and a funeral feast is given to all the relatives. In the name of the deceased, birds are fed with the food placed on a leafy plate. No *Srádha* is performed for the propitiation of the manes of the departed. If the spirit of the deceased person is suspected of having reappeared, in a ghostly form, a small metal plate, with his image engraved upon it, is placed in the god's room and worshipped on every festive occasion.

**Social Status.**—The social status of the tribe is very low. No castes, other than the lowest unclean classes of Mahar (Mala),

Mang (Madiga), Chambhar, &c., will take food or water from their hands, while they will accept food from all Hindu classes except the lowest unclean castes. The members of the tribe are not allowed to enter the court-yard of great temples. They have few scruples regarding their diet and will eat fowls, pork, scaly and scaleless fish, field rats, jackals, foxes, cats, mongooses, carrion and the leavings of the higher castes. They indulge freely in strong drink and the tumult that ensues therefrom generally ends in a fight.

**Occupation.**—The vagrant Erakalás are professional burglars and highway dakaites and are under the strict vigilance of the police. They commit burglaries by digging through the walls of houses with a sharp iron instrument and, after the depredations have been committed, move away many miles from the scene of the crime, disposing of or secreting the plunder very quickly. Their highway dakaities are marked with extreme violence and ruthlessness, ending, not infrequently, in murder. They are very superstitious and never commence their predatory incursions unless the omens are favourable. Their ostensible means of livelihood is to make mats and baskets of date palm, ropes and twines from jungle fibres, slings for hanging cooking utensils and clothes, and ropes for drawing water and tethering animals. With these commodities, the women of the gangs wander from village to village and, under the pretext of selling them, collect information which helps the men in organising crime. The Erakalá females are petty thieves and as they go about begging from door to door they make away with pots and clothes they can lay their hands upon unnoticed. Sometimes they are so bold as to open and plunder locked houses situated in unfrequented lanes.

As a fortune teller, an Erakalá woman is in great favour among all the Telugu castes. She carries, in a date basket, her patron deity Ellamma, in the form of a small circular plate embossed with *cowrie* shells. She invokes the deity and, as if acting under its influence, tells fortunes and reveals the future. Sometimes, possessed by the goddess, she discloses the name of the evil spirit that haunts a family and prescribes remedies for its pacification.

The settled members of the tribe are peaceful cultivators and village musicians. They also work in date palm leaves, making brooms, baskets, mats and toys for children. They have not yet thoroughly repressed their criminal instincts and are frequently suspected of helping their nomadic comrades in the commission of crime.

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