

CASE STUDY ON

# DUCK PASTORALISM IN ANDHRA PRADESH

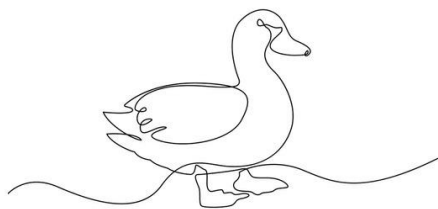


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Namratha Kolla and Kavya Chinda



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## **DUCK PASTORALISM IN ANDHRA PRADESH**

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### **Photos Courtesy by**

Mr. Megavardhan Reddy and Namratha Kolla

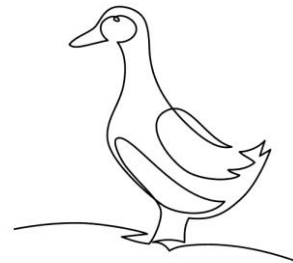
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“After toiling through the day, I have to also stay up at night to protect them from the dogs. Such is our struggle. No matter how hard we work, we never seem to get ahead financially. There is only mounting debt”

- *Eeshwaramma, duck herder*







# DUCK PASTORALISM IN ANDHRA PRADESH

Ms. Namratha Kolla and Ms. Kavya Chinda

*“Duck pastoralism, a nomadic system of animal husbandry, provides an important though under-recognised livelihood for the Yerukula community in southern India. This case study explores the socio-economic dynamics, migration patterns, household roles, and financial structures shaping duck herding in Andhra Pradesh. It highlights the systemic challenges of informal credit dependence, debt bondage, weak veterinary services, and lack of policy recognition. The study concludes with recommendations for integrating duck pastoralism into livestock development frameworks.”*

As per 20th livestock census, the total duck population in India is 33,511 i.e., 3.98 percent of the total fowl and duck population in India. India officially recognises four indigenous duck breeds. While majority of the duck rearing involves small-scale backyard duckery in India, extensive migratory systems are also present in the southern states. Duck pastoralism is a nomadic form of animal husbandry spread across diverse ecosystems of inland waterways, coastlines, ayacut regions and even suburban wetlands, depending on the feed availability, rains and cropping patterns, in southern parts of India. In Tamil Nadu, it is common in the Cauvery deltaic districts of Thanjavur, Thiruvavur, Thiruvannamalai, Kancheepuram, Cuddalore, Vellore and Tiruchirapalli<sup>[1]</sup>. In Andhra Pradesh, nomadic duck rearing is practised primarily by the Yerukula community in Chittoor, Kadapa, Nellore, East and West Godavari districts.

## NOMADISM AND YERUKULA COMMUNITY

Community is a nomadic tribe (NT/DNT) who traditionally earned their livelihood as small traders in the Madras Presidency, during the early nineteenth century. They mainly traded salt, grains and forest produce from coastal to inland areas, using donkeys and bullocks for transport and supplemented their income through mats and basket weaving.

Due to their nomadic lifestyle, they were declared “criminals” under the **Criminal Tribes Act of 1871**, during the colonial period, and were denotified in 1952 <sup>[ii]</sup>. In the 21st century, the Yerukula community are engaged in agricultural labour, pig rearing, herding livestock, gathering forest produce, petty trade and basket and traditional baskets weaving<sup>[iii]</sup>. Despite sporadic land distribution initiatives, many households remain landless.

In the coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh, some Yerukula households have been transitioning to a nomadic form of duck rearing. Improved road networks, low initial investments, access to credit, hatchery-supplied ducklings, and growing markets for eggs and meat have made duck pastoralism a viable livelihood option <sup>[iv]</sup>. These households migrate within and across districts, and sometimes across state borders. For example:

- From Chittoor and Tirupathi districts, several families have been traveling to Kadapa district in Andhra and Mahabubnagar, Nalgonda, Wanaparthy and Siddipet districts in Telangana <sup>[v]</sup>.
- From Prakasam district to East Godavari districts and few of them from Nellore district to Kancheepuram in Tamil Nadu <sup>[vii]</sup> and Warangal in Telangana <sup>[viii]</sup>.



## NATURE OF MOVEMENT

“The decision to move a herd into a locality is said to depend on two key parameters — availability of paddy and availability of water. Duck herders first scout for possible locations, depending on the season, and assess the quantity of feed that would be available in the village to be chosen. They look for villages in which paddy is at various stages of growth, from seedling, through transplanting, puddling and tillering, to ripening. Unless there is a mix of several of these stages, resource management can go wrong, since a mix of various stages of paddy is important for an extended length of stay” – (Nambi, 2020)

This strategic location selection is visible in the practices of Duck herding families such as Gunasekhar’s and Chandra’s. About 40 Kilometers away from their native town of Pakala, adjacent to a vacant and waterlogged plot of suburban Tirupathi, Gunasekhar’s family set up a shanty and a pen for 4500 ducklings. A few kilometers away, his brother Chandra reared 5500 ducklings beside another seasonal wetland earmarked for construction. Both brothers, from the Yerukula community (Scheduled Tribe (ST)), have taken up duck herding less than a decade ago.

Each year, during the onset of southwest monsoon, they search for suburban waterlogged plots across Tirupathi. An ideal location must also minimise road crossings by herds to prevent accidents and economic losses. With tarpaulin sheets, nets, a handful of utensils, groceries and other basic necessities, the families set up camp on these sites for 2-4 months depending on the fodder availability.

### FEEDING PRACTICES:

- Ducklings are fed soaked in broken rice for up to 25 days.
- From 25-30 days, a mix of broken rice and paddy is fed twice a day.
- Thereafter, they forage mainly on aquatic plants, insects, fish, and amphibians.

As winds retreat by the end of September, both brothers set out to the wetlands of Penna River in Kanaparthi village, Chennur mandal of Kadapa district, Andhra Pradesh. The village is approximately 680 Kilometers away from Tirupathi. The ducks were transported on a truck from Tirupathi which costed INR 7000 for 100 Kilometers. Marshes of the Penna River and the paddy



harvesting provides ideal grounds for feeding on overripe grains, insects and snails while their droppings enhance soil fertility and health. The foraging areas were booked in advance by the duck contractors/agents from the concerned local panchayats and the duck rearers were directed to Chennur to forage their ducks. In Kadapa, Gunasekhar and Chandra camped in a mango orchard near paddy fields with other herders.



Ducks wading on the wetlands of **Penna river** in **Kanaparthi village**,  
Kadapa district of Andhra Pradesh

Photo Credits: Megavardhan Reddy

After a four-month halt and sale of the ducks in Kadapa district, in January, Gunasekhar's family moved to Kumbakonam in Thanjavur district, Tamil Nadu with a new lot of 4000 ducklings. In the Cauvery delta zone, the paddy cultivation seasons of Kuruvai, Samba and Navarai offer suitable grounds for duck rearing throughout the year. From this, it is evident that the tenurial arrangements of the nomadic duck herding range from private lands, common lands and private commons or common property resources (CPR).



## ROLE OF THE HOUSEHOLD

Each household member plays a significant role in the production system. While men, women and children were actively involved in wading the ducks, administering feed, supplements and medicine and protecting them from predators like dogs at night, women were additionally responsible for cleaning and maintaining the pens, cooking, washing dishes and clothes of the family. Gunasekhar hired a caretaker for INR 5000 per month, food, accommodation and alcohol. However, he left after 2-3 weeks.

## ECONOMICS OF DUCK HERDING IN ANDHRA PRADESH

Duck pastoralism in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh has evolved into a **financier-driven enterprise** where herders provide the labor while businessmen control every aspect of the supply chain <sup>[x]</sup>. This system, which appears to offer opportunities, often traps families in cycles of **debt bondage** <sup>[x]</sup>.

The process begins when financiers supply ducklings on credit to herding families. Gunasekhar and Chandra's financier – a herder-turned financier – exemplifies this control. He arranges ducks from hatcheries, provides credit and deducts loans from sale proceeds. When the proceeds proved insufficient, families were forced to take a fresh loan to clear the accumulated debts. Chandra's debt has reached ₹2.5 Lacs over three years, forcing him to continue borrowing money for feed, supplements and medicines.

Ducklings cost Rs. 20-22 each from hatcheries in Singarayakonda and Kavali towns. Financiers take a 10-15% commission from hatcheries for every sale. After 16 weeks, ducks weighing 750-900 grams were sold for Rs. 110-120 each, through the financiers, to the buyers from Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha and West Bengal. A typical flock of 4,500-5,500 ducks generate ₹4.95-6.12 lakh gross revenue, but after repaying credit plus 3% compound interest, net income drops to ₹2.30-2.88 lakh.

Meanwhile, in Kumbakonam, a large number of ducklings succumbed to diseases due to unseasonal rains. They suffered losses up to ₹2 lakh pushing total debt to ₹3 lakh. The financiers function as surrogate owners of the flocks while majority of the herders function as sharecroppers of sorts. This dynamic became apparent in Kadapa, where their financier –

a native of Tamil Nadu — sought researchers' help in collecting debts from the herders. While the herders bear all the risks of diseases, weather and markets, financiers only maintain control by treating herders as contractual labour.

## CONCLUSION

Gunasekhar and Chandra's story illustrates how traditional livelihoods get trapped within modern financial systems. While the duck pastoral production system has the potential to provide substantial income for herders, several interconnected factors such as informal credit networks with high-interest rates, financiers' control over market value chain of the ducks, dysfunctional veterinary health infrastructure, lack of access to government support systems and climate change perpetuate their systemic exploitation. However, several studies have shown that integration of duck penning in paddy cultivation complements both the production systems as ducks help in controlling pests, insects and weeds. Duck droppings enhancing soil fertility by increasing nitrogen, phosphorus, calcium, potassium and sulphur levels while their movement improves soil aeration <sup>[xi]</sup>. This symbiotic relationship enhances rice yields, duck egg and meat production. As climate change intensifies, such integrated systems become increasingly valuable for building agricultural resilience.

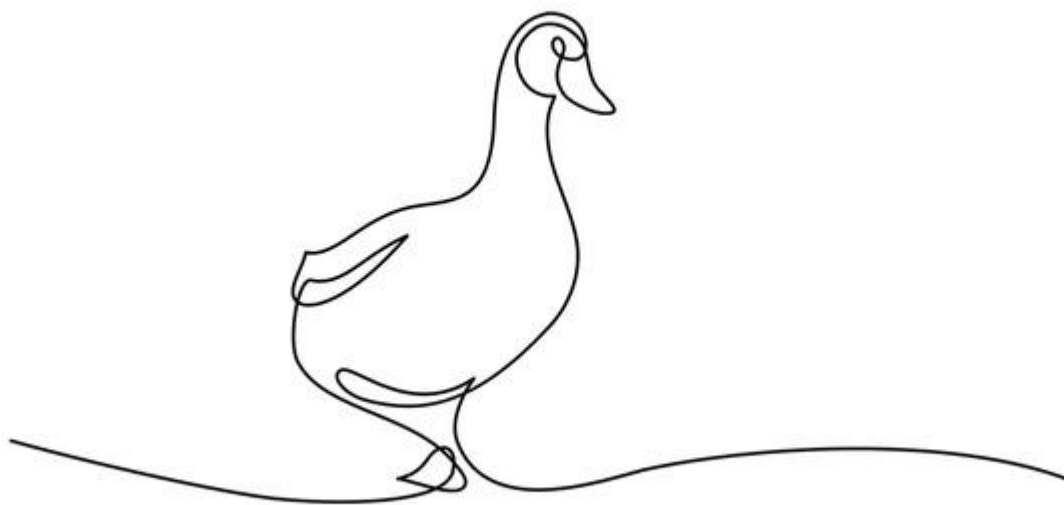
Although there were a few government initiatives in Andhra Pradesh <sup>[xii]</sup>, there is a need for continuous engagement with them vis-a-vis improving the veterinary health management practices such as deworming, vaccination and anti-microbial resistance. The National Livestock Mission of India <sup>[xiii]</sup> intends to increase entrepreneurial development in small ruminant, poultry and pig rearing sector and fodder sector in India. It focuses on enhancing animal productivity through breed development, increase in meat, egg and wool, increasing fodder and feed availability, livestock insurance and so on. However, the scheme does not offer necessary support systems for overcoming the challenges of nomadic duck rearing. Mobilising herders into groups and cooperatives will improve their bargaining power and access to formal credit linkages. Simultaneously, there is an increasing need for integrating the duck pastoral production system into state and national-level livestock policy frameworks.



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Camps set up in a mango orchard beside paddy fields and the river

Photo Credits: Megavardhan Reddy

