

Wading Over the Muddy Fields

The Wandering Duck Pastoralists
of Andhra Pradesh, India

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“On a hot sunny day, when I was travelling for work across the paddy fields of East Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh, which is famous for its lush green paddy fields. I was mesmerized at the sight of the vast expanses of the water filled paddy fields, stretched up to the horizon, iridescently glistening under the bright tropical sun. The fields all around looks as if they were harvested recently and the entire area is littered with stubbles sticking out of the glinting water. In a distance I could observe a few farmers briskly working as if they are already gearing up their fields for the next crop.”

Suddenly, a sharp cry of a vague diminutive human like figure drifting across the distant fields caught the attention of my skimming eyes. It was of a young girl, barely nine years old, holding a long cane twice her height, seen running after a moving mass of a few fluffy little things scuttling across the muddy paddy fields. This made me pause and discern the ongoing action – better to say, a cacophonous commotion. By now, I could clearly hear that the young lady was communicating with someone loudly in an illegible colloquy, in the background of some really loud squawking noises. Further scanning of the horizon reveals two adult like figures, perhaps of a man and woman moving in together from the opposite directions, as if they are closing in on something. Upon looking closely, I have realized that all three of them are trying to bring something large and wayward together; it was a large feathery mass of ducks, which they were carefully aligning together in an orchestrated manner.

As the flock unites, the air resounded with the noise of splashing water, flapping wings, dabbling feet, of hundreds of squawking and squabbling noisy birds. While ducks are now busy in doing their business – feeding, all the three of them had sigh of relief on their rather tense weather-beaten faces.

The trio belongs to the family of Mr. Venkat Rao (40), his wife, Mrs. Subbamma (30), duck farmers and their nine years old daughter, Devi (name changed to protect the identity of the minor), who lends a hand to her parents in taking care of the family’s ducks. Upon inquiry, it was revealed that the family belongs to *Erukula* community (Scheduled Tribe), and hails from Ongole district of Andhra Pradesh. The family is well over 350 kilometers away from their native place! (The family usually covers a distance of over 1200 kilometers in a round trip between North Tamil Nadu and North Coastal Andhra Pradesh). But, why did they come all the way here? And the ducks – hundreds of them? Why did they bring them here? A barrage of questions battered my mind and nudged my curiosity further.

I could not help but to strike up a conversation with the family to learn more about their family and their ducks. Subbamma, says that they are duck farmers. In an uncertain voice of suspicion towards a passing by stranger like me, she says that her family visits this area regularly on their annual seasonal migration. The word migration with such a huge flock of wayward ducks sounded rather unbelievable and strange to me. My inquisitiveness increased further, and I persisted, why do you prefer to come here, year after year? Now with a smirk on her face, the lady replies, *“freshly harvested paddy fields - we come here to feed our ducks, over these muddy paddy fields”*.

Almost the entire stretch of the coastal Andhra Pradesh is covered under paddy cultivation, predominantly maintained under flooded conditions; which is an ideal feeding ground for filter feeders like geese and ducks.



Photo by V S Sainath Pilla

The friendly Venkat rao, seems into the conversation and says that all three of them shares the responsibility of taking care of their ducks. With an unmistakable smile and pride on the face, the father was all praises of his beloved daughter Devi, for her support and enthusiasm in leading the flock to their daily feeding grounds.

The family owns 1.5 acres of land in Ongole district and practices rainfed agriculture as they cannot afford irrigation. Similar to the majority of small-land holding rainfed farmers of their native place the family cultivates paddy but only during the Kharif season. Usually, the majority of small-land holding rainfed farmers of their native place migrate to other places within and outside of the state in search of better opportunities. Most of them return home during the monsoon season to cultivate their lands but few choose not to return. It is often the case that one or two family members stay back at the village to take care of the land and home.

Like many of his small-land holding farmer friends and relatives Venkat rao and his family also migrates for work during the off season. But unlike his peers, Venkat rao choose duck pastoralism an alternative over the other forms of income generation activities.

Venkat rao says that duck pastoralism is a popular economic activity among the small-landholding rainfed farmers of his native place. It is a common practice to move large flocks of ducks over the paddy fallows across the districts and even states following the harvest season.

Ducks should be fed regularly and the duck farmers are always in search of food for their large duck flocks. The ducks and farmers migrate across the districts and even states feeding over the muddy paddy fallows. Thanks to the different harvesting cycles among the districts, the ducks get to eat across the year.

We usually camp at a village for a one month or more depending on the availability of feed for the ducks. We carry all the necessary paraphernalia with us on migration. In addition to all things necessary for a living, the family also carries large nets, tarpaulin sheets and poles necessary for erecting enclosures to secure their flock.



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In addition to the sale of birds at the end of season, the family also earns a regular income from sale of duck eggs at the nearby markets. Each duck lays about 250 eggs in a year. Ducks usually lay eggs at night but occasionally during the day. Collection of eggs is a laborious business, nevertheless, it is very remunerative. Eggs are usually sold at INR 5-6 rupees a piece at the local market. If we do the math, each bird earns the farmer about INR 1250 a year from eggs. A farmer with a flock of 100 ducks can easily earn INR 125,000 a year, provided all conditions remain favourable and constant.

Such seemingly lucrative duck farming has its own challenges and constrains. Moving and transporting huge flocks of rather delicate creatures like ducks is not only a laborious task but also needs utmost care and caution. As a precautionary measure against the loss of birds to accidents farmers prefer to ship their flocks over trucks. However, hiring charges are often quite expensive. Truckers usually charge INR 16 rupees per kilometre for transporting the flock. Logistics blow a huge dent into the income of duck pastoralists but they do it as it is better than getting the flock run over by vehicles on road and losing birds. Despite the best efforts the family has recently incurred a few unfortunate losses, when a few birds were killed by the stray dogs. Also, loss of birds to diseases is quite common and the family lost about 800-1000 birds during an outbreak. Amid the recent COVID – 19 induced lockdown, the duck pastoralists paid a huge price due to restriction on movement.

“Being a duck farmer is tough” says Venakat rao. We lead a rough lifestyle and our survival depends on the wish and whims of the hosting landowners and villagers. We often arrive at villages without any prior relationship with the locals. We then build relationships and make friends with the locals. We erect temporary shacks to store our belongings and rest at nights.

Landowners usually feel happy to invite us to feed the ducks at their farms as they eat grubs and pests and aerate the soil by peddling. Duck droppings is an excellent natural fertilizer as it has a balanced 2.8:2.3:1.7 NPK ratio (nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium), which is very close to the evenly balanced 3:2:1 NPK ratio.

Relocation is difficult and every new camping site is different, few are easy and few are very tough. We often run out of breath from relocation, hauling, packing, and unpacking our luggage takes a toll on us.

We prefer hiring a vehicle for translocation of our ducks. We regularly keep in touch with the truckers over cell phones. It is a herculean and miserable task to organize and haul hundreds of ducks and our luggage from village to village in search suitable feeding grounds to feed the ducks and setting up our temporary camps.

Once we land at a suitable site and erect our shacks, our day begins before the sunrise. We cook and have breakfast, pack our lunch and career the ducks to the feeding ground before 7:00 AM. We should constantly watch out and keep on our toes while the ducks feed to prevent any toward incident. The ducks feed until dusk and we return to the camp around 6:00 PM. The ducks are secured in a makeshift enclosure made of tarpaulin sheets pegged to poles. No matter how careful we maybe but there is no guarantee that the number of ducks returns to the camp at evening will be equal to the number of ducks left the site in morning. Inevitably, a few birds fall prey to dogs and other predators, run over by vehicles while crossing the road. As outsiders, we often remain powerless to protest any mistreatment or loss of birds, as our survival hinges up on the support and mercy of the locals.

We often do not have proper access to veterinary services for prevention of potential outbreaks. We buy the same vaccines that are given to chicken (no separate vaccines are available specifically for ducks) and vaccinate the birds on our own.

“We own around 1.5 acre of rainfed agriculture land in Ongole district but what can we cultivate on such small piece of unproductive land without irrigation?”

Laments Subbamma.

“My mother takes care of our land and house at the village. It pricks our heart when we think of our land and home and lead the life of migrants, moving from one village to the other.”

joins Venkat rao.



Photo by V S Sainath Pilla

“Here, it feels nice to walk over the soft muddy fields, than walking on rock hard and parched fields at our native place. Ducks love water, they cannot live without it. We must ensure that these little critters finds a good place with plenty of water and food to live happily.”

Rejoices Subbamma.

Photo by V S Sainath Pilla

What is your future goal? I asked Devi. “I want to rear ducks just like my parents.”

Replies the gleeful young lady.

“Our kids often land in a vortex of confusion, whether to take education or duck farming/pastoralism. We want our daughter to go to school and study and do not take up duck farming for a living”

– gently controverts Subbamma.

“Brother, what day is tomorrow?” It is Friday. “Thanks a lot!”

“We have a local weekly market on Fridays. I’m not able to keep a track of the calendar as we don’t live at home. We should start segregating the eggs as per the colour and size. We sell the big and bright white ones to the duck breeders for production of ducklings and smaller ones to customers for consumption”

– sings off Venkat Rao.

“Pastoralism with monogastric species: - Ducks and geese Duck herding is quite widespread in Tamil Nadu, South India. Duck producers are so lacking in capital that they purchase ducklings from traders in return for a contract to sell the eggs produced back to the traders. Ducks feed mainly on freshly harvested rice paddies, which benefits farmers, as they loosen the soil, eat weeds and insects and drop manure. The ducks are nowadays moved between farms on trucks, although formerly they were herded. Traders pass to buy the crop of eggs once a week and the ducks can be sold for meat after two or three years. With careful management, these sharecroppers can become independent producers after several years.” (Blench, 2001, Pp.78. - Adapted from Nambi, 1999). See also, Malhotra and Gadgil, 1988; Pradeep, 2017.

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