

The Nellore Yanadis



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WHILE TRAVELLING from the landing place — on the Madras “Buckingham Canal” — to Nellore, we were made to experience the novel sensation of a transit of fifteen miles in comfortable modern carriages each briskly dragged by a dozen of strong, merry men, whom we took for ordinary Hindus of some of the lower or Pariah caste. The contrast offered us by the sight of these noisy, apparently well-contented men, to our palanquin-bearers, who had just carried us for fifty-five miles across the sandy, hot plains that stretch between Padagangam on the same canal and Guntoor — as affording relief — was great. These palanquin-bearers, we were told, were of the washerman’s caste, and had hard times working night and day, never having regular hours for sleep, earning but a few *pice* a day, and when the *pice* had the good chance of being transformed into *annas*, existing upon the luxury of a *mud-soup* made out of husks and damaged rice, and called by them “pepper-water.” Naturally enough, we regarded our human carriage steeds as identical with the palanquin-bearers. We were speedily disabused, being told by one of our Brother-members — Mr. R. Kashava Pillay, Secretary to our Nellore Theosophical Society — that the two classes had nothing in common. The former were low caste Hindus, the latter — *Yanadis*. The information received about this tribe was so interesting, that we now give it to our readers, as we then received it.

Who are the Yanadis?

The word *Yanadi* is a corruption of the word “Anathi” (Aborigines), meaning “having no beginning.” The Yanadis live mostly in the Nellore District, Madras Presidency, along the coast. They are divided into two classes:

- 1 *Cappala* or *Challa*, “frog-eaters,” “refuse-eaters”; and
- 2 The Yanadis proper, or the “good Yanadis.”

The first class lives, as a rule, separated from the Śudra population of the district, and earns its living by hard work. The *Cappala* are employed to drag carts and carriages in lieu of cattle, as horses are very scarce and too expensive to maintain in this district. The second class, or *Yanadis* proper, live partly in villages and partly in the jungles, assisting the farmers in tilling the land, as in all other agricultural occupations.

Yet both classes are renowned for their mysterious knowledge of the occult properties of nature, and are regarded as practical magicians.

Both are fond of sport and great hunters of rats and bandicoots. They catch the field mouse by digging, and the fish by using simply their hands without the usual help of either angle or net. They belong to the Mongolian race, their colour varying from light brown to a very dark *sepia* shade. Their dress consists of a piece of cloth to tie around the head, and of another to go round the waist. They live in small circular huts of about 8 feet in diameter, having an entrance of about 1 1/2 feet in width. Before building the huts they describe large circles round the place where the huts are to be built, muttering certain words of magic, which are supposed to keep evil spirits, influences and snakes from approaching their dwelling-places. They plant round their huts certain herbs believed to possess the virtue of keeping off venomous reptiles. It is really astonishing to find in those little huts two dozens of persons living, for a Yanadi rarely has less than a dozen children. Their diet consists chiefly of rats, bandicoots, field mice, cangi, guano, and a little rice — even wild roots often forming part of their food. Their diet, in a great measure, explains their physical peculiarities. Field mice account partly for their having so many children each. They live to a good old age; and it is only very seldom that one sees a man with grey hair. This is attributed to the starch in the cangi they daily drink, and the easy and careless lives they lead.

Their extraordinary merit consists in the intimate knowledge they possess of the occult virtues of roots, green herbs, and other plants. They can extract the virtue of these plants, and neutralize the most fatal poisons of venomous reptiles; and even very ferocious cobras are seen to sink their hoods before a certain green leaf. The names, identity and the knowledge of these plants they keep most secret. Cases of snake bite have never been heard of among them, though they live in jungles and the most insecure places, whereas death by snake bite is common among the higher classes. Devil-possession is very seldom among their women. They extract a most efficacious *remedy*, or rather a decoction, from more than a hundred different roots, and it is said to possess incalculable virtues for curing any malady.

In cases of extreme urgency and fatal sickness they consult their seer (often one for twenty or twenty-five families), who invokes their tutelary deity by sounding a drum, with a woman singing to it, and with a fire in front. After an hour or two he falls into a trance, or works himself into a state, during which he can tell the cause of the sickness, and prescribe a certain secret remedy, [by] which, when paid [for] and administered the patient is cured. It is supposed that the spirit of the deceased, whose name they have dishonoured, or the deity whom they have neglected, tells them through the medium of the seer, why they were visited with the calamity, exacts of them promise of good behaviour in future, and disappears after an advice. It is not infrequently that men of high caste, such as Brahmans, have had recourse to them for such information, and consulted them with advantage. *The seer grows his hair and lets no razor pass his head.* The Yanadis shave their heads with the sharp end of a glass piece. The ceremonies of naming a child, marriage and journeys, and such other things, are likewise consulted.

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They possess such an acute sense of smell, or rather sensitiveness, that they can see where a bird they require is, or where the object of their game is hiding itself. They are employed as guards and watchmen for the rare power they have in finding and tracing out a thief or a stranger from his footmarks. Suppose a stranger visited their village at night, a Yanadi could say that the village was visited by him (a stranger) by simply looking at the footsteps.

