

Unique Tribes of Coorg

Lalitha K. P.

Assistant Professor, Department of Kannada, BMS College for Women, Bengaluru, India

ABSTRACT

This document gives a study of the extinct tribes in Coorg (Kodagu), a district in Karnataka state, India. In this paper an attempt has been made to discuss various aspects of life of tribes in Coorg. An analysis of Social Life of tribal people in Coorg has been done with an emphasis on their customs and traditions like marriage, status of women etc.

Keywords: Coorg, Kodagu, Kodava, Tribes.

INTRODUCTION

The diversity and variety and of course, the underlying unity of India is obvious. These people of each region of this vast land of the Indian Union have certain distinctive strands and features-in face and figure, food and dress, language and literature, faculties and traits. Therefore each region has some uniqueness of its own. Yet a common culture binds the people of India together. India extending from Kanyakumari in the south to the Himalayas in the north is the motherland of the Indians. In this vast tract of land, Kodagu is a very tiny spot, which had once the status of a state and now forms a district of Karnataka.

The Coorg tribes are entirely different from the other communities of South India. They have their own unique social customs. Their dress and ornaments do not have anything in common with what is generally known as typically South India. During the Vedic period the Aryans had established themselves in North India and the Dravidians in the South. The great epic Ramayana is said to be roughly 500 years (3000 B.C.) old. The story of Kodagu is even more ancient. Its soil was sanctified by Sri Rama both on his way to Lanka and on his return from there. The people of Kodagu worshipped Rama even from the Ramayana times. There is a sacred spot called 'Iruppu' in the village of 'Kurchi' in South Kodagu on the Brahmagiri hills, where there is a temple of Rama. The Ramatirtha stream and the Lakshmanatirtha river take their sources on one range of the Brahmagiri hills; and, on another in North Kodagu, the Kaveri takes her source.

KODAGU THROUGH THE AGES FROM THE VEDIC PERIOD TO THE PRESENT DAY – CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

- Vedic period:
 - Aryans in the North and Dravidians in the South
 - The Era of the Great Epic Ramayana – About 2000 B.C.
- Later Vedic Period:
 - Migration of Indo-Aryans to the South – 600 B.C.

***Address for correspondence:**

lalithakrashi@gmail.com

- Gangas of Gangavadian Talakad – 100 to 980 A.D.
- Earlier Kadambas of Banavasi and Halsi – 450 to 560 A.D.
- Early Chalukyas of Vatapi (Badami)
 - : Pulikesin II – 630 A.D.
 - : Vikramaditya I – 654A.D.
- Pandyas of Madurai: Maravarman Rajasimha I – 730 to 765 A.D.
- Cholas – 985 to 1176 A.D. and Earlier Changalas – 1034 to 1249 A.D.
- Kongalvas of Shanivarasanthe and Arkalgud – 1004 to 1176 A.D.
- Hoysalas of Belur and Dvarasamudra – 1116 to 1300 A.D.
- Kongalvas – 1034 to 1297 A.D.
- Hoysalas – 1116 to 1300 A.D. and Earlier Changalvas of Chenganad – 1034 to 1297 A.D.
- Later Chalukyas of Vatapi (Badami) – 1050 to 1192 A.D.
- Nava Dannayakas of Gundlupet – 1300 to 1321 A.D.
- Vijayanagar Kingdom – Between 1390 and 1565 A.D. and Petty Cheiftains called Nayakas.
- Later Changalvas – From the end of the 14th century to 1644 A.D.
- Belur Nayakas – 17th century
- Kodava Nayakas – 1600 to 1633
- Haleri Rajas – 1600 to 1834
- British Rule – 1834 to 1947

STATES REORGANISATION: Kodagu became a district of Karnataka, 1956

What is unique about Kodagu and its tribes? Pre – historic dolmens or burial cairns were found in Kodagu as in other parts of South India. Though these cairns throw some light on the life of those pre-historic people, we cannot form an opinion as to who they were – whether the remains form an opinion as to who they were, whether the remains that are found were the Coorgs or that of the original inhabitants of the tract of land like Yeravas, Holeyas, Kudiyas etc, is not clear.

SOME OF THE TRIBES OF COORG

Yeravas

They are said to be originally from Wayanad, who were, like the Holeyas in Coorg. They were held in slavery by the Nairs. They are found almost entirely in Kiggatnad and Yedenalknad taluks. They speak a language of their own, a dialect of Malayalam, and live with the Coorgs, but always in separate huts or near the jungle. They are much sought after as Labourers. They appear to be treated much as slaves, and features: have thick lips and a compressed nose, and are very scantily clothed. At their weddings and their pandal – ata or demon feast, they chant their peculiar songs, and have dances in which, as with the Paleyars, their women take part. They disguise as Panjaras and Paniyara in dense masses which are never disturbed by a comb: their appearance is most extraordinary, like that of the Australian Papua. The Paniyas Yeravas appear more civilized.

Kuruba (Shepherd)

This caste consist Kambli Kurubas and Hal Kurubas. There are also other classes of Kurubas, called Betta, Jenu and Kadu Kurubas; but these latter classes are distinguished from the two former by being

classed among the wild tribes. The Kambli and Hal Kurubas live in the villages, whereas the others, as their names denote, live in the forests and jungles. The two former are also known by the name Ooru (Village) Kurubas. It seems doubtful whether there are so many Ooru Kurubas as the number shown in the statement, viz., 687. Of this number 174 are labourers, 6 agriculturists, 7 domestic servants and 17 who came under the head of manufacturers or Kambli-makers. They worship all kinds of idols, stones, trees and evil spirits.

Uppar

The Uppars as the name implies, were originally a caste occupied in making salt. Now they engage in bricklaying and carpentry and about a third of the whole number have been returned as labourers. The total number of males are 83 while females being 16.

Peggades

They immigrant cultivators from Kerala and are found all over the Province, but chiefly in Yedenalknad and Padinalknad. Like the Aimmokkalu, they conform to Coorg customs, but are equally excluded from the community of the Coorgs, in whose presence they are allowed to sit only on the floor, while the former occupy a chair. The Peggades speak Coorgi.

Kavati

They are not a numerous class and are found in Yedenalknad. They resemble the Coorgis in language and dress and are said to have come originally from Kerala.

Marta

These are a small class in Coorg. Their number is probably understated, as they generally call themselves Smarta Brahmins, though no Brahmin will recognize them. They are almost confined to Yedenalknad taluk.

Dombas

They are a class of professional wrestlers, tumblers and beggars. They are Shudras from the north of India and speak a dialect of their own, similar to Hindustani. They are found in small parties scattered all over Coorg and Mysore.

Maleyas

They are a small wandering tribe of gipsies from Malabar, who speak Malayalam. They pretend to cure diseases and extract money from the ignorant.

Kaniyas

They are said to be the descendents of a Malayalam Brahmin and a lower caste woman.

Jamma: A System of Land Tenure

There is a special system of land tenure in Kodagu known as the Jamma. This special land tenure Jamma means birth under which most of the Kodavas who held their land were bestowed on them by Rajas ensuring their military allegiance. It was a hereditary right passing from father to son and for that reason was called Jamma which meant birth. This special tenure was exclusively bestowed on the Kodava community though there may be Jamma holders of other communities whose number may be negligible and who got it by virtue of service to the king. The objective of the bestowal on the Kodava community was to ensure their help in times of war. The Jamma tenure was a light one in terms of money being only half of the rate of the Sagu land. People holding Jamma lands were liable to be called upon for military service. According to Rev. G. Richter who wrote "A manual of Coorg", the Jamma ryots are still liable to be called out to repel outward aggression and quell internal disturbances, to furnish all police and treasure guards etc. during peace time. Jamma tenure was of advantage in view of not only the economic benefit but also of local prestige. It signified that the holder was the son of the soil having deep roots in Kodagu land.

A FEW UNIQUE CUSTOMS FOUND IN THESE TRIBES

Kudavali Mangala

There are three varieties of Kudavali (living together) marriages viz., the marriage of the widow with one of the brothers of the late husband, marriage of the widow with a man of a different family and marriage of a divorced woman. Usually 'Kudavalis' are contacted due to the exigencies of the family, or of the children. These marriages are simple ceremonies and lack the pomp and gaiety of the

'Kannimangala'. The widow can marry one of the brothers of the dead husband and continue in the same family or she can marry one of the cousin brothers of the deceased husband. According to this kind of marriage the groom will observe all the customs of a 'Kannimangala' and will perform the 'Muhurtha'. For the bride this being the second marriage she will have no 'Muhurtha', for according to the kodava custom a woman can have only one regular marriage whereas the man is entitled for more.

Kudavali with One outside the Family

If the widow intends to marry a person outside her conjugal family, first she has to sever her connection with it and return to her natal family. The custom of severing the connection is called 'Kallumara Kaipō'. According to this the 'Aruva' of the bride's natal family with two of its members and the 'Aruva' of the late husband's family with at least one or two people not belonging to the family must be present at the function. The ritual is performed in the central hall of the house. The boxes and things which the widow brought at her marriage should be kept there. The presence of the widow is considered as not necessary.

Kudavali of a Divorcee

There is only a slight difference in this 'Kudavali' specially in the custom of severing the connection to the late husband's family. But according to this custom it is not decent that she should contact another marriage before the lapse of at least six months.

Okka Parije

If in a family there is only one unmarried girl and no heir, the girl is married according to '*okka parije*' by which the children of the marriage become members of their mother's natal family. The man who marries her ceases to be a member of the wife's family. This arrangement is made so that the family should not become extinct.

Makka Parije

This marriage takes place only for the rights of the children. In the event of there being no male in a family, a daughter is maintained to represent the name of the family and a husband is procured for her. This husband does not become a member of her family as in '*okka parije*', nor does he become alienated from his own family but can take a wife for his own family thus raising the seed for both the families. The children of '*Makka parije*' have rights of inheritance only in their mother's family.

The husband need not stay permanently at the house of the '*Makka parije*' wife but should visit her and help her in raising the required progeny to perpetuate the family. During his stay the wife is expected to provide him with food and clothing. This is known as '*obbangala*'. The wife should maintain herself and the husband will have no responsibility of providing for her. The husband will have no right over the properties of the wife.

Kutta Parije

If an unmarried girl becomes pregnant and if the man who caused pregnancy does not agree to marry her (*bendu parije*) or the woman or man dies after childbirth, and if the head of the family of the man has no objection to give the child or the widow the rights of the family of the man, that can be done on the day of the death itself before the elders of the family and villagers. The formality of bestowing slightly differs according to the occasion.

There is a special kind of marriage based primarily on superstition and this need not have a bride!

If a married woman dies without children, the parents of the woman or the other members of the natal family can claim from her conjugal family the jewels, trousseau and other things given to her at the time of her marriage.

A widow or a divorced wife can return to the natal family for shelter but she is entitled for food and clothing only but will not have any other rights.

CONCLUSION

These unique tribes have very rich folk culture and art; unfortunately they are in the brim of extinction, for which the government and the society should show concern towards these tribes and it is their responsibility to help them flourish as for India is well known for the variety of cultures it has.

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AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY



Dr. Lalitha K. P. was born in Kodagu district of Karnataka, India. She is a Gold Medallist in Kannada Literature, Master of Arts – Post Graduation Course from University of Mysuru. She has also been awarded Doctorate (PhD) in Folklore from the same University. Presently, she is serving as an Assistant Professor in BMS College for Women, Bengaluru.