

Space for ethno-lingual minorities within the framework of Hindutva and Hinduism with a focus on the Kodava community

Lahari K.V. and M. Sharon Lopez

Date of Submission: 25-01-2021

Date of Acceptance: 11-02-2021

I. INTRODUCTION TO KODAGU AND THE KODAVAS

The Kodavas, (who later came to be called Coorgs under the Colonial rule) are a community from the hilly district of Kodagu in Karnataka, India. Classified as a Hindu caste by the Indian constitution, the Kodavas have currently been placed under OBC (III A). Being a warrior tribe, the Kodavas consider themselves Kshatriyas under the Varna system.

The Kodava National Council (CNC), formerly known as Kodagu Rajya Mukti Morcha (KRMM) is an organisation founded by Nandinervanda Nachappa Kodava had been demanding a separate statehood for the region until the '90s, while recognising the community's inherent loyalty to Hinduism and the Republic of India.

The Kodavas take immense pride in their culture that is considered very unique and have been putting forward various demands to be protected by the government for decades. One of the main things that is being demanded today is the status of Ethno-linguistic tribal minorities to Kodavas under Article 340 and 342 of the Indian constitution.

The dwindling numbers of the members of the community, people migrating to other cities or countries have all been perceived as threats to the continuation of this ancient culture and way of life. In the recent years, movements in the media, especially social media have come up with full force to create awareness about the Kodava traditions and rituals among the members of the community. Several organisations have dedicated themselves to do this work.

Currently, the community has been categorised under the Other Backward Classes (OBC). However, this paper will examine whether this status for the community is justified. Recently, there have also been movements seeking Tribal Status for the community as it is believed by some that this could help preserve the culture and help the Kodavas not merge with the Brahminical Caste System.

II. BACKGROUND: RELIGION AND NATIONALISM AMONG THE KODAVAS

To see whether the Kodavas indeed fit into the popular perception of Hinduism, it is important to understand their customs, traditions, beliefs, history and the present socio-political context.

One of the main deities of the Kodavas is Goddess Kaveri and the Kaveri Purana that has been passed down from generation to generation can be found in the Skanda Purana. Kodagu has its own hierarchy and this process began with the coming of the Lingayat kings in the 17th Century. This is when the Brahminical influence started in Kodagu and would slowly get incorporated in the day-to-day lives of the people.

Sanskritisation is a process whereby groups elevate themselves in a hierarchy by adopting the customs of higher castes. These practices are frequently Brahminical, i.e., those of the upper, "priestly" class, and pan-Indian.

The Kodavas and their language, the *Kodava thakk*, underwent the process of Sanskritisation with the retelling of the Kaveri Puranas by the famous poet Haradasa Appacha Kavi. As is seen in the lyrics, Appacha attempted to raise the morale and create a

feeling of unity among the Kodava population by asserting the Kaveri myth as the legendary backdrop to the origin of the Kodavas.

This retelling of the Kaveri purana can be seen as one of the foremost events in the history of the relationship between *Kodavaame* and Brahminical Hinduism.

Around the same time it is important to note that the way Hinduism as an organised religion was perceived was changing with the census and enumerations and classifications conducted by the British to help them in their governance. This is not to say that the British created a new system, the census results merely emphasised the boundaries and a left deep impact on ethnic and religious boundaries

The Kodavas were one of the “fuzzy communities” that dissolved into enumerated categories and further into political communities - a new source of political mobilisation in British as well as Independent India.

In the recent years, it can be observed that there has been a growing support for the right wing political parties, such as the Bhartiya Janta Party. The Modi wave has not spared the Kodavas and it is clearly visible not just in the election results, but also social media posts and support for decisions made by the ruling party.

What is still surprising is that out of the 23 random people who were served a questionnaire, 82.6% of them said their primary identity would be Kodava. While 4% said it would be Hindu, another 4% said they'd identify as Indian and only 2% would make their responsibility/role towards their families their primary identity.

Panic about the slow death of the Kodava culture is fuelling social media movements and giving people a platform to express their disapproval of newer phenomena like “inter-caste marriages”.

A community that has proved to favour the Hindutva ideology does not primarily identify as Hindu. This raises the question, what is the common area in the Venn diagram of Hindu Nationalism and Kodava nationalism that explains this behaviour.

Typically, the Kodavas do not require the assistance of brahmin priests during births, deaths or weddings. But in the recent decades, *pujas*, *homas* and *havanas* in homes have become increasingly popular. Other than Goddess Kaveri, traditionally, the kodavas worship their ancestors, nature gods and gods that migrated from the Malabar. But with time, these local gods have undergone the process of Sanskritisation as well and have come to be seen as forms of major Hindu Gods.

Keeping in mind that a demand for the tribal status for Kodavas is also being propositioned, the question that might naturally arise here is whether retaining the unique culture and getting a tribal status and falling into the uniformed form of Hinduism that the far-right aims to create can go hand-in-hand?

III. MEDIA AND RIGHT-WING POLITICS

Does the media have a role to play in the way the image of Kodavas is perceived by Kodavas themselves and also their larger socio-political views?

In the 21st Century, the Kodavas still take pride in being a warrior clan. This image has repeatedly been reinforced by popular Kannada media. Kodagu was a state by itself post-independence, up until 1956 when it merged with the then state of Mysore, which gradually formed Karnataka. Kodagu has sought to separate from Karnataka, but Karnataka has chosen to make the Kodava culture the face of the state on many monumental occasions, such as Doordarshan's *Mile Sur Mera Tumhara* and the tableau at the Republic Day Parade at New Delhi.

Kannada films also reinforce the image of the Kodava male as a patriot who is ready to give up his life for the nation, while the Kodava female is stereotyped as exotically beautiful.

Sowmya Dechamma outlines an upper-caste, Hinduising agenda that has attempted to assimilate the Kodava minority to the state of Karnataka in particular, but more broadly to the nation, through valorisation of one of the enduring images of the Kodava male, that of self-sacrificing warrior.

More visibly, posts that get shared on social media give us an insight about how the community perceives itself. Of all the communities residing in Kodagu, the Kodavas consider themselves on the very top of the hierarchy.

IV. FINDINGS

There are hateful speeches against people of certain communities and inter-caste marriage is a hot topic always ensuring a huge outcry. A survey was conducted to find out what people of the Kodava community think about some of the hot topics related to them and find out what influences their beliefs. There is a great amount of opposition to the sale of Jamma Land (inherited land of the kodavas from the time of the Lingayat kings) to people of other communities. The survey showed that 17.7% of the respondents agreed that people should be able to sell their Jamma land to anybody regardless of their origin, but 62.5% of the people were opposed to the idea of the inherited land going into the hands of other communities. This perhaps is directly fuelled by the fear of Kodavas losing their homeland.

When asked what sources they generally consume news from, 58.3% of the respondents said it was mainly from online news sites, 33.3% of the people said it was newspapers for them while only 8.3% admitted to consuming news from TV channels. This could be because most of the respondents belonged to a younger age bracket and TV news is generally consumed by an older demographic.

One of the most commonly mentioned news sites were Daily Hunt, which does not take a strong stand against political issues and is hardly seen criticising the ruling party. TV9 Kannada and Republic TV were also mentioned, both of which do not hide their political alliances.

Social media is also an echo chamber where one meets people with similar views and it is very likely that the same people encounter posts that villainises certain groups of people – in this case, the Muslims. It can be argued that one commonality between Kodava nationalism and Hindutva nationalism is its unequal treatment of one particular minority i.e, the Muslims.

Kodagu has ardently opposed the celebration of Tipu Jayanti ever since the ruling party of the state at the time (INC) introduced the idea. Kodagu sees Tipu not as a freedom fighter, like the rest of the country largely does, but as an invader who invaded their land multiple times, looted their riches, raped their women, massacred thousands and forcibly converted thousands more to Islam. The bitterness has remained and this could be one of the reasons why the Kodavas are subconsciously able to identify with the BJP and its fringe groups.

All of this helps us understand why Kodagu might identify with the right-leaning government led by Bhartiya Janta Party rather than a more liberal Indian National Congress. However, what is in it for the Kodavas? Will subscribing to Hindutva ideology while being unaware of its implied consequences go hand in hand with trying to retain a culture's individuality within the strict realm of this ideology? What can be the possible consequences?

V. OTHER BACKWARD CLASSES, ST OR RELIGIOUS MINORITY? WHERE DO THE KODAVAS BELONG?

What is interesting is, even within Kodagu, there are parallel movements that do not necessarily identify with Hindutva. One such movement is the demand to be awarded tribal status. Is it a justified

claim? What does it mean to be a tribal community?

To answer this question, it is necessary to acknowledge that this classification of castes under General, OBC, SC and ST is inherently Brahminical.

Lawyer Disha Wadekar, in an interview with Akademi Magazine said, “When the British colonised us, they very efficiently reinforced caste and its influences. Caste is very flexible. It moulds itself to everything. So caste moulded itself to the colonial legal system so well that we cannot differentiate between the two now. When the colonisers left, the legal system had to be governed by someone - and the upper caste have a history of governing law and society - so they assumed the position vacated by the colonisers.”

Soumya Dechamma, argues that Kodavas are not Kshatriyas like the popular claim says today. She believes that the Kodavas are an order on their own. Why are Kodavas placed under OBC? Can a community where nearly every family owns land be lower caste?

She says, “When a community defies definition that frames it within the brahmanical order, the state apparatus finds it convenient to ‘bind it serially’ in the OBC Hindu list, thereby saying that although communities like the Kodavas are ‘a little different’ - they eat pork for instance - but are not Christians and are not Muslims, and therefore they are Hindus. And precisely because they are different, they need to be down in the order but not outside of it, this difference needs to be assimilated into the very end of margins as a ‘different Hindu’ defined by the state/hegemonic groups.”

This makes it clearer that the caste organisation we see today is very reflective of the Brahminical order.

So why are the Kodavas demanding tribal status? To answer that question it is first important to see

what criteria makes a community eligible to hold the scheduled tribe status.

The criterion followed for specification of a community, as scheduled tribes are indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness. This criterion is not spelt out in the Constitution but has become well established. It subsumes the definitions contained in 1931 Census, the reports of first Backward Classes Commission 1955, the Advisory Committee (Kalelkar), on Revision of SC/ST lists (Lokur Committee), 1965 and the Joint Committee of Parliament on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes orders (Amendment) Bill 1967 (Chanda Committee), 1969.

Adivasis who belong to the Scheduled Tribe Category are mostly not considered Hindus, however some of them are. For example, The Sarnas of the Chhota Nagpur region, Jharkhand have been demanding not to be counted as Hindus in the census, claiming that Sarna is their religion.

The Kodavas might be a group with distinctive culture that worships its ancestors and nature. However, with time, they have mingled well with the larger society and are known to have accepted liberal ideas well enough, albeit selectively. Not just school education, but college degrees are seen as a necessity and a matter of reputation among the Kodavas. This applies to the women as much as it applies to the Kodava men. Because of Jamma Bhoomi and agricultural expanse, most Kodavas have come to own land and employ other people, generally people of other “lower castes” to work in their estates and fields. Kodagu, being one of Karnataka’s most famous tourist hotspots cannot be called geographically isolated either. Considering all this, the answer to whether Kodavas fit the criteria for ST status becomes quite clear. No, they do not.

The alternate option would be to seek religious minority status.

Wanting to switch from OBC to ST category, one might sense a desire to move away from the Hindu/Brahminical caste order, which might give the Kodavas a stronger sense of self divorced from mainstream Hinduism. However, the Kodavas have been stereotyped as Hindu warriors right from the times of The Lingayat Rajas who ruled Kodagu, and overtime Kodavas themselves have completely internalised this narrative too.

However, it is worth noting that the ST category was created for the upliftment of the historically oppressed communities and Kodavas, are relatively better off and privileged in numerous ways as comparatively. This might lead to people who don't really need the reservation and other aids taking up someone else's rightful space in institutions.

In Assam, there was backlash from Adivasi communities when six communities - Koch-Rajbongshi, Tai-Ahom, Chutia, Matak, Moran and Tea Tribes - who have never been considered Adivasis started demanding ST status. This proposed inclusion of some of these socio-economically advanced communities was seen as a threat that would potentially "eliminate the very concept of tribals in India".

So far we have explored the many, often contradicting ways in which the Kodava community sees itself. What could be the possible outcomes of these beliefs, ideologies and movements?

VI. CONCLUSION

In the recent years, the Kodavas have knowingly or unknowingly adopted several practices from Hinduism that were not being practiced earlier. One of the best examples is the Homas conducted at individual homes with the help of Brahmin priests. It is important to note here that the Kodavas traditionally do not recognise Brahminical Supremacy and all the Brahmins living in Kodagu

are said to have migrated from neighbouring districts.

An article about such a homa conducted at the Bangalore Kodava Samaja, a socio cultural association of the Kodavas living in Bengaluru, stated that the homa was a deviation from the Kodava religious faith.

Soumya Dechamma believes that the hierarchy among the various groups living in Kodagu is an evil replica of the Hindu caste system. Here certain jobs are traditionally allotted to certain communities, and as discussed earlier in the paper, the Kodavas undoubtedly enjoy the top position in this hierarchy.

Maybe it is easier for the Kodavas to identify with the Hindu caste hierarchy because of the social order present in Kodagu, which in turn makes them lean towards right-wing ideologies. Or maybe it is a result of brainwashing by popular media and the identification of a common enemy, as discussed earlier. It is even likely that it is simply the lack of knowledge of how the caste categorisation came to be and that not every community who does not belong to one of the other major religions is Hindu by default.

While the Kodavas have recognised a decline in their traditions and culture, their blame for it is very misplaced. While understanding one's own culture, it is important to look at how it has arrived to be what it is today, rather than readily accept what is given to us in our time.

Caste, as we know it today is a product of decades, if not centuries worth of social changes and misinterpretations. It is easier to let your culture undergo Sanskritisation and move up the social ladder rather than assert freedom as an independent community that does not see itself as a part of the Brahminical order.

It is high time for the Kodavas to wake up and locate the real threat to their culture, and work towards finding solutions.

REFERENCE

- [1]. Soherwordi, Syed Hussain Shaheed. "Hindusim '-A Western Construction or an Influence?" (2011).
- [2]. Jayaprakash, Jyothi. "Myths and Motives: Kodagu and the Story of Kaveri Purana" (2018)
- [3]. Napier J, 2019, "'There Should Be No Performances" Relocating Kodava Songs in a Changing Tradition', PULS Journal for Ethnomusicology and Ethnochoreology, vol. 4, pp. 103 - 122
- [4]. Srinivas, Mysore N. Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952. Print.
- [5]. Bhagat, R.. (2012). Census enumeration, religious identity and communal polarization in India. Asian Ethnicity. 14. 10.1080/14631369.2012.710079.
- [6]. C., Sowmya. (2016). Naming, nation, and negotiations: Kodavas and their 'illegible' identities. Contemporary South Asia. 24. 197-209. 10.1080/09584935.2016.1195339.
- [7]. Napier JJ, 2017, "Kodava Hero', Appear Only Once Before Me': The Assimilation of 'Internal Exotics' in Indian Film Songs.", Journal of Music Research Online, vol. 8
- [8]. SowmyaDechamma C. C.. (2016) Naming, nation, and negotiations: Kodavas and their 'illegible' identities. Contemporary South Asia 24:2, pages 197-209.
- [9]. Vikaspedia.In. vikaspedia.in/social-welfare/scheduled-tribes-welfare/scheduled-tribes-in-india. Accessed 9 Nov. 2020.
- [10]. Correspondent, Special. "'ST Status to Non-Tribals Will Destroy Tribals.'" The Hindu, 8 Oct. 2020, www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/st-status-to-non-tribals-will-destroy-tribals/article32798727.ece.
- [11]. Coorg News. "EXIT KODAVA (COORG) CULTURE? BANGALORE KODAVA SAMAJA CONDUCTS 'HOMA.'" Coorg News, 8 Nov. 2020, www.coorgnews.in/kodagu-culture/exit-kodava-coorg-culture-bangalore-kodava-samaja-conducts-homa.