



THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN KODAVA COMMUNITY

Dr. D. Menaka Thammaiah,

Associate Professor of Political Science, Government First Grade College, HSR Layout, 24th main, 14th A cross, Sector 1, HSR layout, Bangalore- 560102.

ABSTRACT

The *Kodavas*, the inhabitants of Kodagu in Karnataka, have their own social customs, dress and language which is different from the people living around them in the rest of South India. Owing to the absence of various inhibitions like the purdah, lack of property rights, the dowry system, child – marriage and a dreaded widow hood afflicting the sisters of *Kodava* women in other Hindu communities, the *Kodava* women are one of the most advanced groups in the country. This paper analyses the origin of the term Kodagu, the various theories concerning the origin of *Kodavas*, the unique style of draping the saree by *Kodava* women, the specialties of *Kodava* wedding and the uniqueness of jewelry worn by *Kodava* women.

Key words- Kodagu, *Kodava*, Women, Social customs, *Kodava* community.

INTRODUCTION

Kodagu is the smallest district in Karnataka having a wonderful and lovely natural sceneries. It is from the word *Kudu* (which means hilly place) that the word Kodagu has come. Madikeri, the capital of Kodagu is very small but beautiful town.

Origin of the Term Kodagu

It is said that the term ‘Kodagu’ has been derived from ‘*Kudumalenadu*’. In ancient Tamil literature, terms like ‘*Kudumalenadu*’ or *Kudakam* have been mentioned. ‘*Kodimalenad*’ meaning a dense forest land on steep hills is mentioned as the meaning of Kodagu, since *Kodi* means a summit or peak.

In spoken language of the *Kodava*, the term ‘*Kodayee*’ means hunting ground and from this word the district might have derived its name, is another view. In inscription No 347 of Chamarajanagar taluk, Kodagu has been referred as ‘*Kudugurunadu*’.

Lt. O’Connor, in his Memoirs of the Coorg survey is of the view that Kodagu may mean “country of millions of hills” due to the hilly nature of the country. According to other sources, the word Kodagu means the land situated to the west, so called by the people on the Mysore plateau. Kodagu district, unlike other districts of Karnataka state, is not named after its headquarters town. The British anglicised Kodagu as ‘Coorg’ during their rule but the original name has been restored to Kodagu, and is often described as the ‘Switzerland of India’, ‘Scotland of India’ or the ‘Southern Kashmir’.

There are legendary Puranic sources relating to Kodagu history. ‘Kaverimahatmye’ a canto on Skandapurana (11th to 14th chapter) contains certain legendary stories regarding Kodagu. In ancient times Kodagu was known by various names such as Matsyadesha, Brahmadesha and Krodhadesha. According to these legends, Brahma the creator of the universe, who was on pilgrimage, came to Kodagu. He performed penance under an amalaka (nelli) tree with one hundred branches and thereupon the place came to be called Brahmagiri and Kodagu came to be regarded as Brahmakshetra. Legend also states that Brahma had a vision of Vishnu here.

Another legend has it that Chandravarma, son of Siddhartha, the King of Matyadesha had a vision of Goddess Parvathi who gifted him a kingdom. He had 11 sons from a non-kshatriya princess. Parvathi called them as

'Ugras' and they came to be regarded as equal to the Kshatriyas. As Chandravarma originally came from Matsyadesha, the region came to be called Matsyadesha.

Kodagu was also known as 'Krodhadesha'. According to another legend the eleven sons of Chandravarma married the princesses of Vidarbha. Their progeny multiplied and they took to agriculture in Kodagu. Like wild boars, they worked with their nails and the land they formed came to be called Krodhadesha. Such legends are found in 'Kaverimahatmye'

'Codagu' or 'Coorg' as a tiny tract of land meaning 'inside west' (situated to the West), and formed its own administrative unit (until 1956). They both described the geographical location of the district as being bound on the north by the Hassan district, on the east by the Mysore district, on the west by the South Kanara district, all of Mysore state (now Karnataka) and on the South by the Cannanore district of Kerala state. Kodagu is the smallest district in Mysore state and its population according to 2011 census was 554,519 residing in an area of 4, 102sq.kms. Kodagu had three taluks namely Madikeri, Somwarpet and Virajpet. later two more taluks namely Ponnampet and Kushalnagar were created, in the Gazette notification issued by Government of Karnataka on 3rd July 2020 and 20th November 2020, respectively

Geography and Physical features of Kodagu

The district has a mountainous configuration which presents a grand panorama of verdant valleys, fast-flowing streams, and lofty peaks. Towards west, the summit of the Western Ghats attains great heights and the entire western portion of the district is an unbroken chain of hills which appears like a formidable wall from the foot hills, on the side of Kerala. The highest peak of the district is Tadiandamol (1908 metres MSL). Close to this peak to the south-east, there is Sannamale, highest mountain in the former Padinalknad taluk, which overlooks the Kodamtora pass and is regarded as a sacred place. The table land of Madikeri maintains an average altitude of about 1166 metres above sea level and slopes down a little to reach 910 metres near Kushalnagar. This plateau is bounded on the west by the continuation of the Western Ghats which is at peak near Bisle pass in Pushpagiri hill, (about 1870 metres MSL) which is a remarkable two-pointed hill of vertical height and of peculiar shape. The district has a rich-flora and fauna, due to its forest cover. There are three wild-life sanctuaries, (Brahmagiri, Talakaveri, and Pushpagiri) and one national park (Nagarahole National Park, also known as Rajiv Gandhi National Park)

Coorg or Kodagu is chiefly populated by its native ethnic tribes *Kodava*. Besides the other principal communities that reside in Kodagu District are Kodagu Gowda and Muslims. While the minor tribes that dwell in Coorg include Airi, Male-Kudiya, Malaya, Kapal, KembattiMaringi, Meda, Heggade, Kavadi, Kurubas, Kolla, Koleya, Kanya, Kudiyas, Ganiga, Golla, Thatta, Koyava Banna, Yereva (Thammaiah 2021, 95-99).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To examine the unique culture of *Kodava* community.

To understand the high position of *Kodava* women since time immemorial.

To provide insight to the uniqueness of *Kodava* wedding, style of dress of *Kodava* women and the jewelry worn by *Kodava* women.

THE KODAVA COMMUNITY

The *Kodavas* the inhabitants of Kodagu, form a community with striking physical unique Their social customs are unique and is entirely different from other communities of South India. Their dress and ornaments do not have anything in common with what is generally known as typically South Indian. *Kodava Thak* is a dialect of their own (Cariappa 1981, 9). They are fair, tall, strong and well- built. Throughout history they have distinguished themselves as fierce fighters belonging to a martial race.

According to a recent census by the Karnataka unit of the Bureau of Economics and Statistics the population of Kodavas has alarmingly dwindled from 1.5lakh in 2001 to 1.25 lakh in 2011 (Aiyappa 2011).

There are various theories concerning the origin of *Kodava*. In the Cauvery Purana it is said that the *Kodavas* are the descendants of Chandravarma, the renowned king of Matsya Desha. As Chandravarma's Kshatriya wife was barren, he received a Sudra wife from Goddess Parvathi who bore eleven sons. Being children of Kshatriya father and Sudra mother, they were called Ugras. Kroda Desha the other popular name given in the Cauvery Purana since the descendants of king Chandravarma levelled this land of hills by their hands and feet and hence the name.

Indian writers are a few who hold that the Kodavas belong to the Chanakyas clan of about eighth century and settled here on their Southern expedition. The Chanakyas of the lunar dynasty belong to Manavyasa Gotra, cross the Narmada about the fifth century A.D and came into the peninsular India.

There is a view held that *Kodava* culture and outlook resemble the ancient trading stock of muslims who were Arabs and Kurds. Similarities between Arabs and *Kodavas* with regard to costume of the *Kodavas* including the head- dress, *Kal- Padicha* or the foot -jewels of the bride, marrying the brother`s wife after his death, objection to marry sister`s daughter, using of meat at the occasion of wedding and other functions and resemblance of *Bolakat* and other types of *Kodava* dances with that of Arabs` dances and so on make us believe that these people might have migrated into South for trade purpose. But at the same time it is realized that such identical traits are found with some peoples of northern India who live in the hill areas of Assam, Nepal or Rajasthan (Muttanna 1953, 12-13, 299- 301).

Wherever they came from, the *Kodavas* decided to stop and make their home in the rugged hills of Kodagu or Coorg. Over the centuries, the wild hills hid the little region from the eyes of the world, offering the people protection and freedom to roam in the dense forest. They named the trees, shrubs and medicinal herbs and learned how to use them (Ponnappa 2013, 21). The *Kodavas* do not owe allegiance to any religious head. Brahmins do not officiate as priests at ceremonies like weddings.

They worship Mother Earth, the Sun and Fire. Ancestor worship is prevalent among the *Kodavas*. *Karona*, the ancestral heads of every family is offered *meedi* or sacrifice by killing fowls and sometimes pigs, once a year on festive occasion. They abide in the village forests known as *devarakadu*, God`s forests. These forests are looked upon with veneration and no trees or plant are cut in such forests out of fear and reverence for the deities. The *Kodava* clan are many to mention and every family has a particular name. And *Kodava* family or *occa* is a patrilineal joint family. The *Kodavas* have their own special festivals *Huthri*, the harvest festival, *Kaveri Sankramana* – the celebration of the birth of river Kaveri and *Kailmurth* or the worshipping of weapons are the most important of them (Cariappa 1981, 65, 78-79).

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN KODAVA SOCIETY

Goddess Kaveri is the family deity of the *Kodava*. *Kodavas* are known as Kaverammeda Makka, meaning Goddess Kaveri`s children, hence the entire womankind is treated with kindness and respect.

The Kani Pooja at the *Kaveri Sankramana* festival is performed by women in every household. Naturally, the poojaris of the family deity are always respected in the household. In all the *Kodava* folk- songs the woman is called *devi*, meaning a goddess. Purdah system was never practices by *Kodava* women. Child marriage was unknown. The marriageable age was always higher compared to other parts of our country. Widow marriage is permissible. Widows are expected to wear a white dress without any jewellery. But society has not imposed on window such harsh customs as shaving off of the head, only one meal a day, and household drudgery in the kitchen and the backyard during the rest of their lives. There is no dowry system among the *Kodavas*. The offer of marriage should come from the boy`s side. Even from the ancient days the right to property of a woman in her parents` and husband`s families was fully recognized (Cariappa 1981, 85).

As per 2011 census of India, Kodagu`s population in 2011 was 554,519 out of which 274,608 are male and 279,911 are female. Kodagu sex ratio is 1,019 females per 1000 of males., which is higher compared to Karnataka sex ratio average- 973 females per 1,000 males

(Kodagu District Population, Caste, Religion Data (Karnataka)

<https://www.censusindia.co.in/district/kodagu-district-karnataka-576>).

Kodava women are very fair, beautiful, tall, strong and courageous. As *Kodavas* are exempt from the provisions of Arms Act, both men and women possess fire- arms and are experts in using them.

There are interesting stories about the strength and courage of the *Kodava* women of ancient days. During the reign of Mudduraja (1633-1687), one Doddavva of Almanda family had earned a name for her good physique, strength and good behavior. The Raja desired to test her strength. He gathered some strong women including Almanda Doddavva and asked them to lift and carry over a distance fully packed salt bags of considerable size. Doddavva and Chinnavva, mother of the famous warrior Bonira Muthanna, lifted the heavy salt bags with ease and carried them over some distance. Mudduraja was pleased with their performance. He made a free gift of lands and *urthakkame* or leadership of the village, to the Almanda family. There was once a brave woman named Cheeyavva belonging to the Kelapanda family. One day, when she had gone to the forest to collect twigs for

broomsticks, she saw a tigress and a cub. She killed the tigress with bamboo stick. The honour of *narimangala* (tiger marriage) was given to Cheeyavva.

The bride is accepted in the new home by the mother-in-law like her own daughter. In fact, when the bridegroom goes to his house with his bride, the bride's mother-in-law gives the bride *palkulu*- milk and cooked rice. On the following day, the mother-in-law combs the hair of the bride, generally an affection showed on the daughter.

On all auspicious occasions like marriages, first of all, all the women take part in the *muhurtha*. At the grand lunch after the *muhurtha*, women are served first. Only after the women, the men have their lunch.

Kodava women have their own folk-songs and dances. They have their song called *lello paat* and *ummat aat*, a dance with the rhythmic striking of small cymbals (Cariappa 1981, 86-87).

The southern room of every house is called a *kanni kombarey*- *kanni* meaning *kanya* and *kombarey*, a room.

A pregnant woman is looked upon with great care and affection. During the advanced stage of pregnancy, the nearest relations bring for her *puttu poray*, a headload of eatables and *koopadis*- all manner of delicious food preparations, tied up into one bundle (Cariappa 1981,87-88).

The Style of Dress of Kodava Woman- The dress of *Kodavathi*, the *Kodava* woman, is unique and extremely graceful. There is an interesting story about the origin of the *Kodavathi*'s saree. According to *Kaveri Purana*, a mythological story, Devakantha, the king of Kodagu, had a dream that, on a particular day Goddess Kaveri would take the form of a river and that he should go with his subjects and wait upon her. Accordingly, Devakantha and people waited at Balamuri in Kodagu. The Kaveri came in a flood. Devakantha and all the people took a holy dip. The *Kodava* woman took their dip, dressed in their sarees and facing upstream. Because of the forceful flow of river Kaveri their sarees were swept backwards. In the token of the holy dip in the river Kaveri when she was born, the *Kodava* women started wearing the saree tucked behind. Another story suggests that in olden days *Kodava* men and women had to climb trees sometimes to escape from wild animals. Women also used to climb trees and shoot arrows at enemies. Therefore, women started wearing sarees with pleats fixed behind. The *Kodavathi*'s saree is generally 5 to 6 meters in length. One end of the saree is tucked on the left side over the hip and gathered into pleats and tucked behind, and the other end is wrapped under the left armpit, spread over the right shoulder and knotted in front on the right side of chest. The front layer of the saree is tightened by tucking the frills over the waist on the right side. They wear a *vastra* (head-kerchief) about one-and-a-half-meter square. The harsh weather probably accounted for the need to wear a *vastra*, made of chiffon or georgette, embroidered on the edges and more elaborately embellished over the forehead and then gathered at the back, to fall gracefully over the shoulders, *Kodava* women usually wear full sleeves and high necked "jacket" made of cotton. Again, this is to protect them from very cold weather (Cariappa 1981, 81-82).



Kodava women in their traditional attire

SPECIALITY ABOUT KODAVA WEDDING

It's a known fact that in every Hindu marriage, it is the husband who ties the 'Mangalsutra' to the bride on the wedding day. However, in *Kodava* community the "*patthak*" (*Kodava* Mangalsutra) is tied by the bride's mother on the night before the official wedding.

There is a legend to explain why this is so.

During the time of Gods and Kings, and at the period when Gods and Goddesses visited the earth, a lovely *Devi-Kanyé* (*Apsara*) fell in love with a mortal man from earth. The man, a Prince new to the area, became lost while hunting. Mesmerized by the beauty of the *Kodava* land he stopped to rest under a tree. He caught sight of an

enchancing maiden picking flowers in the distance. The Prince instantly fell in love with the beautiful Apsara. She too noticed the strong, handsome Prince and was smitten by him.

The Prince and the Apsara spent their time blissfully in each other's company. However, both the *Devi-Kanyé* and the Prince were well aware of the fact that, she being a celestial, immortal creature, her father and family would oppose their union and forbid her from marrying him. They would stop her from leaving the heaven again and any effort from her to meet him would cost her status as a celestial being. But the thought of separation was unbearable to both of them.

Eventually the time came for the Apsara to return home and the couple had no choice but to part ways. While she walked back home shattered and with tears in her eyes, she ran into her old acquaintance, the *NagaDeva* and *Devate* (Snake God & Goddess) and narrated her woeful tale and upon hearing her story the Naga couple decided to help her. Being wise folk they suggested a solution to her problem. They told her there was a way for her to marry the prince. For this, they informed the couple, that the Prince, being a human, couldn't tie the Mangalsutra to her as this would mean her having to give up her immortality & lose her status as an Apsara. But if she could arrange for someone from her own world (heaven) to tie the knot on his behalf she could retain her heavenly status & live with her Prince on earth. But there was one condition to this and that was that the person tying the Mangalsutra had to be sometime very close to her. Someone who loved & cared for her more than anyone else without expecting anything in return. They suggested that she ask her mother to tie the Mangalsutra and sanctify her relationship with her prince charming. The *Nagas* also promised to be her guardians & protect her from all the evil and perils of the human world.

Back in heaven the Apsara explained her dilemma to her mother. Her mother, on hearing her tale, agreed to tie the Mangalsutra and sanctify the marriage so that her daughter could go & live with her lover. Her father and rest of the family also agreed to let her go too under this condition. Hence she got married in heaven with her family's blessing and left to her husband's house the following day. Even to this day *Kodavas* have two Muhurthams on same day. The first is a separate (Single) muhurtha with each one's family, and the other is the '*Dhampathi-Muhurtha*' (dhampathi means couple) which is performed in the presence of both the families.

The descendants of "Apsara" and the "Prince" still maintain the tradition to this day. *Kodavati* women get their *Pathak* tied by their mother a day before she gets married in the presence of all the elders of the clan, and then goes to her husband's house the next day. A *Pathak* is gold coin set with corals or rubies surmounted with a snake hood. The *Kokke-thati* a crescent-shaped large-sized pendant studded with rubies and tiny bunches of pearl-drops on a long chain of light gold beads jewellery too, has a similar snake hood as tribute to *NagaDeva* and *Devate* (Rising Kodavas, 2017).



Mother tying *Pathak* to her daughter

In the common form of marriage which is known as *kanni mangala*, the first marriage for the girl as well as for the boy. At the end of *dampathi muhurta*, the groom stands in front the bride, showers rice on her head, offers her sip of the milk in the kindi and gives her a *cheela-pana* (a small red silk bag containing at least one gold, one silver and one copper coin). This signifies his sharing all his wealth with his bride. Then the groom offers his right hand to his bride and holding her hand help her stand up.



Bridegroom giving *cheela-pana* to his bride

After the *dampathi muhurta*, a very important ritual called *sambandha kodapa*, -transferring of the bride to the bride- groom`s family and conferring on her the rights and responsibilities of the groom`s family, takes place. During the *sambandha kodapa*. An elder in the bride`s party (*aruva*) gives his counterpart in groom`s party twelve pieces of gold, which represents her birth right in her parent`s home that she has now given up. The bride`s *aruva* actually gives eleven pieces of gold retaining one piece of gold because her connection with her natal family is too deep and fundamental to be severed completely. If she divorced or some other calamity befalls, she has a right to return to the natal family. This is the significance of the withholding of one gold piece.

Other than *Kanni mangala*, in olden days there were other two types of marriage

Occaparije mangala- If in a family there is only an unmarried girl and no heir, the girl is married according to *occaparije*. The man who marries the girl ceases to be a member of his parental family and becomes a member of his wife`s family. This is also called *kuthiku nippo*. This is to save a *kuthi* or a family from becoming extinct for want of a male issue. The children of this marriage become members of their mother`s family.

The other type of marriage which existed in olden days was *makkaparije mangala*. When a family is threatened with *kuthinasha*, this is extinction for want of a male issue, the unmarried girl of the family is married to a man from another family according to *makkaparije*. Unlike in *occaparije*, the husband does not leave his natal family. The husband has no right over the properties of his wife and the children of *makkaparije* have the right of inheritance only in their mother`s family. The *makkaparije* wife can keep her husband as long as necessary, to get male children. (Cariappa 1981, 91)

Jewellery of Kodava Women

The jewellery worn by the *kodava* women are inspired by nature in the form of flowers, fruits serpents, moon, sun and stars.

Patak- A ruby-studded pendant of a gold coin, with the hood of a snake at the top. The pendant is fixed to a gold chain connected to a string of coral beads and black beads. This is somewhat like thali of other Hindu women.



Kokkethathi - A crescent –shaped large-sized pendant studded with rubies and tiny bunches of pearl- drops on a long chain of light gold beads strung on a silver thread. The pendant has the hood of a serpent on the top centre.



Jomale is another attractive necklace in two or three rows of gold beads interspersed with a string of beads, the sting being one of black silk.



Jodi Kadaga is a double bracelet of solid gold.



The bride wears *Kaisara*- It is a bracelet with very delicate chains running over each finger ending in ornate ring, and *Kalpilli* - silver ornaments for the bride's feet. (Monappa, Coorg Jewellery.in)

Prominent Kodava Women

- Pandianda Seetha Belliappa: She was the first *Kodava* women in the congress to court arrest in Coorg during the freedom movement.
- C.B.Muthamma: The first women to write Indian Civil Service examinations in 1948 and to join the Indian Foreign Service in 1949.
- Ashwini Nachappa: She is an accomplished athlete and the glory girl of Indian female sprinting at the turn of the 80's having beaten P.T.Usha.
- Joshna Chinappa: She was the first Indian girl to win the British Squash Championship title in 2003 in the under 19 categories.
- Daisy Bopanna: Indian actress in Bollywood and South Indian movies. Her hit movies: *Gaalipata* (Kannada,2008); *Garam Masala* (Hindi,2005); *Bharatchandran IPS* (Malayalam, 2005); *Prajapathi* (Malayalam, 2006).
- Nidhi Subbaiah: Indian film actress and model, who has appeared in various television advertisements and in South Indian films, predominantly in Kannada
- Prema: Actress of South Indian Movie. She has won a state Award for the Category 'Best Actress' in 1996 for the movie "Om". She has bagged Film fare award for the movie 'Kanasugara' in 2001.
- Prema Cariappa: former mayor of Bangalore and MP.
- Ashwini Ponnappa: National badminton player.
- Rashmika Mandanna: Indian actress. She is the recipient of SIIMA Awards. (List of Kodavas)

Kodava women contributing to the income of the family

As the Coffee prices crashed in the international market for a couple of years, women extended their helping hand to their husbands by making provision for home stays as a source of alternative income.

Kodava women are experts in delicacies like *Kadambutt* (steamed rice ball), *pandi curry* (Pork curry), *nuputt* (rice noodles), *bymbale* (bamboo shoots). They use their mastery in kitchen as well as to spin out some delicious wine and whole list of goodies.

CONCLUSION

Kodava women are bold and beautiful. *Kodava* women have always enjoyed a better status in the society compared to other women in Hindu society and are held in high esteem. *Kodava* community has contributed more number of men in Indian army only because their wife's are managing their estates with all boldness.

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