Tracing Kodava Women's Histories: Intersections of Oral Tradition and Textual Archive

Veena Poonacha

Abstract: Feminist historiography foregrounds questions about the historical representation of women and the use of various tools of inquiry. The methodological challenges posed by these questions become particularly pronounced when attempting to recover the lived historical experiences of women from small agricultural and forest communities who remain marginal to mainstream history. This study is undertaken as a methodological experiment to investigate the historical experiences of Kodava women from an indigenous community residing in Kodagu—a densely forested, mountainous region in Karnataka.

Kodagu, once an independent principality until its incorporation into the Mysore state in 1956, has a minimal presence in dominant historical narratives. To overcome the limitations of conventional historiography in accessing Kodava women's experiences, this study turns to the oral traditions of the Kodavas, based on the assumption that these sources may contain traces of women's lived experiences in history. The study underscores the difficulty of recovering women's historical experiences from sources—both textual and oral—that are controlled by men. It reveals more about how men represented women's lives in historical narratives than about how women themselves perceived and navigated their lives amid broader socio-economic and political transitions.

Keywords: Local history, Kodagu, Women's History, Historical Sources, Oral Traditions

Introduction

Is it possible to recover the lived lives of women from small, agricultural, and forest-dwelling communities by investigating historical records and oral traditions? This question emerges within the broader context of feminist efforts to reclaim women's lived experiences in history. Such attempts align with subaltern initiatives that challenge historical narratives traditionally written from the perspectives of elite men. These efforts underscore the 'politics of history writing' and highlight the difficulty of accessing credible historical

data on grassroots communities—especially women, whose historical and cultural experiences have been systematically excluded from mainstream narratives.

While feminist and subaltern scholars have used archival resources to construct multi-layered historical narratives, they have also transcended narrow disciplinary boundaries, adopting innovative methods to recover the experiences of those outside dominant historiography. In addition to biographies, autobiographies, life writings, and literary texts, oral histories, life narratives, testimonials, and oral traditions have proven effective in enriching historical understanding. However, not all forms of orality are accepted as valid sources of history. Although there is growing acceptance of oral histories, testimonials, and eyewitness accounts as legitimate historical sources, many historians remain hesitant to uncritically accept oral traditions. This reluctance stems partly from the challenge of situating oral traditions within precise timeframes and partly from the fact that oral narratives are constantly reworked and reinterpreted in each telling. As community memories evolve in response to changing socio-economic and political contexts, new elements enter these narratives. Consequently, there is concern about the reliability of such sources, as they can be manipulated to serve contemporary political agendas (Thapar 215).

Writers such as Kosambi (1–11), Sontheimer (3–18), and Chowdhury (39–42) have emphasized the importance of oral traditions in preserving and transmitting history and culture across generations. They argue that stories, myths, legends, songs, dances, and performances maintained by communities, village groups, or clusters of villages are the primary means through which historical knowledge is passed down (Finnegan 3). Women's Studies scholars such as Raheja, Godwin, and Chowdhry have effectively used these resources to recover women's experiences within specific socio-cultural contexts. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to explore the lived experiences of Kodava women by examining both textual records and the oral traditions of the Kodava community. The

Kodavas are a small, land-owning agricultural community who have long resided in Kodagu—a historically independent principality until its integration into Mysore State (subsequently renamed Karnataka) in 1956 (GOI 103; Hunter 28–48). Located on the rugged eastern slopes of the Western Ghats, Kodagu was geographically and politically peripheral to mainstream historical developments. The written history of Kodagu is largely shaped by 19th-century colonial writings, which present a static image of Kodava society. These records fail to illuminate how men and women navigated the socio-cultural, economic, and political transformations of their time. Composed from the perspectives of missionaries and British officers, these texts reflect colonial interpretations of historical facts derived from military dispatches, reports by British officers, and inputs from their networks of native informants. Post-1947 historians have also largely overlooked the possibility that small communities like the Kodavas might possess complex, layered histories.

This study investigates oral traditions expressed in Kodava Thakk, a distinct South Indian language spoken by the Kodavas and 18 other small communities in Kodagu district. It is important to clarify that these oral traditions were shaped predominantly by dominant Kodava women, who held power in defining the socio-cultural narrative. As a result, the voices of less powerful women often remain unheard. The attempt to reclaim the historically lived experiences of Kodava women is constrained by the limitations of available historical sources—both textual and oral. These sources were largely produced by a specific class of men with particular ideological leanings. As such, they reveal more about how powerful men historically represented women than about women's own interpretations of their lived realities. This paper begins with a brief ethnographic overview of Kodagu, then examines the representation of Kodava women in textual and oral sources, and concludes with a discussion of the methodological challenges involved in recovering women's lived histories.

Ethnographic Context

Despite being located at the confluence of three major South Indian cultures—Malayalam, Tulu, and Kannada—Kodagu possesses a distinctive socio-cultural history. Its culture is shaped by the historical experiences of people living in a mountainous, forested landscape and an agricultural economy that necessitated cooperation between the Kodavas and other endogamous groups such as the Heggades, Koyvas, Airis, and Gollas, as well as landless agricultural workers like the Poliyas and Yervas. The Kurbas inhabited the dense forests surrounding the settled agricultural areas. Kodagu's harsh climate and rugged terrain historically contributed to a low population density, a condition worsened by the devastating Anglo-Mysore wars that convulsed South India in the latter half of the 18th century. During these conflicts, the population of Kodagu—especially the Kodavas, who constituted the warrior class—suffered heavy losses. Nineteenth-century ethnographic records noted that, by the end of the Mysore wars and the fall of Tipu Sultan in 1799, the Kodava population had dwindled to around 5,000 men, women, and children. The subsequent increase in population was driven more by immigration, following the introduction of coffee as a commercial crop, than by natural growth (Rice 203).

The early history of Kodagu remains obscure. Historians have only been able to reconstruct parts of its past through a limited number of copperplate and rock inscriptions dating between the 9th and 17th centuries, though exact dates are not always clear. These records suggest that the core region of Kodagu was ruled by local chieftains, while peripheral areas were governed by various South Indian dynasties. In the 16th century, these local chiefs became feudatories of the Vijayanagara Empire. After its fall, Kodagu was divided into numerous warring petty principalities. Seizing the opportunity, a scion of the Ikkeri dynasty from Keladi established himself in Palpare (outside Kodagu) and gradually took control of Kodagu through strategic political maneuvering rather than direct conquest (Richter 230). The 200-year rule of the Ikkeri dynasty (1633–1834) was significant in unifying the region

under a single administration. The administrative and military systems introduced during this period were not radical departures from previous governance structures but built upon them. Various Kodava clans continued to occupy administrative and military roles throughout this era.

The Kodava social organization comprised patrilineal clans. The members of each clan lived in their ancestral house (*ainmane*) and owned large landholdings[1]. The *jamma* (inherited) landholding was indivisible and vested in the ancestral house. The *Manual of Coorg Civil Law*stated, "the *jamma* (inherited) land was jointly owned and the idea of division of property was not recognized in the Coorg law" (Cole 113). This meant that clan members were entitled to maintenance but could not ask for a share in the ancestral property. The eldest male member of the clan administered the property on behalf of the clan. After his death, the next oldest member took over its management. These ancestral homes were solid structures marked by the design of fortification. Near each ancestral home lived the agricultural labourers from the Poliya, Yerva, and Kurba tribes in small houses provided for them by the clan. The nearest neighbour lived at a considerable distance—perhaps on the other side of a hill or valley. A few such scattered houses and the homes of their labourers together formed a village in Kodagu (Iyer 5–8; Srinivas 6–7; Boverianda Chinnappa & Nanjamma 15–25).

The mainstay of the economy was rice cultivation. Coffee, as a commercial enterprise, was introduced into Kodagu by the British. Folk literature, as well as 19th-century ethnographers, indicated that women did the cooking, cleaning, and participated in farm labour. Rice describes women's work as follows:

[1] The Kodavas no-longer reside in their ancestral homes (*ainmane*), but maintain these houses as sites of ancestral worship.

> As for industry, the Coorg [Kodava] women deserve high praise. They rise early, and besides cooking and other domestic work, they bear a large share in the labours of the farm. The men plough the field, transplant, and reap the rice; the women carry manure, weed, fetch home, and clean the paddy. The men do no menial work, they leave that to their women and to their servants….
>
> A Coorg woman is rarely idle, her busy hands always find some work to do and no wonder if we consider the life and bustle of a Coorg household with its 40, 60 or 80 or more inmates. Two or three generations, grandfather, and grandmother, their sons, and daughters-in-law and the children of these families all live and mess together. The labourers also belong to the household and look up to the mistress for goods and orders. The fattening of the pigs, the milking of the cows, the water supply for the house, these and many other cares are under the immediate supervision of the mistress. (Rice 221–223)

Women's position, as indicated by the customary marriage practices documented in the 19th-century ethnographic records, shows that the Kodavas did not practice pre-puberty marriages, and that women were marriageable at any age. There was no bride price or dowry in consideration of marriage (Cole 2–7). The nuptial ceremony was performed by the members of the extended kin group, without the intervention of priests—Brahmanical or indigenous. The legalization of marriage was through the *sambanda edipa* rite (an oral contract) between the two clans, witnessed by the community and executed by the *aruvás* (members of the neighbouring clans representing the two clans). The orally transacted marriage contract specified a woman's rights in marriage. It recognized that if the marriage

ended either due to divorce or widowhood, her right to return to her natal home was inviolate (Richter 131–135; Emeneau 123–47).

Customary family laws recognized a woman's right to remarry after widowhood or divorce. While children of divorced parents typically lived with their father's clan, family genealogies document instances where children were inducted into their mother's clan. These laws included provisions to acknowledge pre-marital relationships through two forms of marriage. The first, known as *bendu pareje* marriage, provided post facto recognition of the relationship. It inducted the woman into her partner's clan and granted jural rights to the child born of the union. The second, known as *kutta pareje*, was conducted if either the man or the woman died before their pre-marital relationship received social sanction. This arrangement enabled the community to induct the child born of such a union into either his/her mother's or father's clan. Such legal provisions were necessary because an individual had no social existence outside the clan.

Additionally, in the absence of male heirs, the law allowed a woman to contract a short-term marriage (*makka pareje*, also referred to as *pachadaka nadipa*, conducted by presenting the woman with a white cloth, comparable with the Nair *sambandham*) to continue her lineage through her children. The woman also had the option of an *okka pareje* marriage, by which her husband was grafted onto her family lineage. This required him to renounce his rights in his *patri* clan and adopt the identity of his wife's clan (Nadikerianda Chinnappa 56–140).

Representation of Women in Historical Sources

Conventional sources (such as archaeology, epigraphy, and documents) reveal the paucity of materials available to reconstruct Kodagu's historical past. Archaeological excavations have, undeniably, uncovered the existence of megalithic sites, dating approximately from the 1st century BCE to the 3rd century CE (Rao 54). However, the

stories and narrative traditions of early communities are lost in the mist of time, and connections drawn between this period and subsequent history are speculative.

Epigraphic sources[2] found between the 9th and 17th centuries in Kodagu were not as extensive as those found in other parts of Karnataka. Written in old Kannada, Malayalam, and Tamil scripts, these inscriptions indicate the wider sociopolitical and cultural influences on Kodagu. Engraved on temple doorways or rocks near water tanks, riverbeds, and paddy fields, the inscriptions recorded grants by kings, queens, and princesses to Hindu and Jain temples, or to holy men and heroes. Others documented their charitable works, such as the construction of a village tank or a boarding house for wayfarers. The inscriptions etched on *kollekallu/virakallu* (memorial/hero stones) recorded the deaths of kings, queens, heroes, and those who committed altruistic suicide (*nisdhi*) for spiritual salvation or to revive a dried village tank.

Historians regard inscriptions as tools for revealing official versions of events and as assertions of power by rulers (Thapar 52). Therefore, it is not always possible to understand the cultural significance of the memorial stones and their inscriptions. A memorial stone erected by Rajendra Chola Kongavala in memory of his queen Padmalai in 1077 CE (No. 81) suggests that a hero and his wife sacrificed themselves to accompany the deceased queen as her companions, or "Gandharvas" (semi-divine beings in Hindu mythology). The carvings on hero-stones were typically arranged in three panels, depicting the hero's death, the funeral, and his accession to heaven. Hero-stones featuring engravings of women with raised palms in funeral scenes have been curated in the Kodagu museum as *sati* stones.

A few hero stones—though not as elaborately carved—have been found near the ancestral homes of the Kodavas, reflecting the cultural emphasis on heroism for men and

[2] The inscriptions examined are from *Epigraphia Carnatica* (Coorg Division, Vol I) published by the Institute of Kannada Studies, University of Mysore. It was the revised and reprinted edition of Bengamin Lewis Rice's work first published in 1886.

chastity for women. Interpreting such historical evidence in the Kodava context presents challenges due to the distinctive features of their customary family law. This law recognized women's rights to divorce and remarry and, in the absence of male heirs, allowed women to contract short-term marriages for the purpose of bearing children and continuing the lineage. The ancient origins of these customs are evident from two 13th-century inscriptions. Inscription No. 52 states that, in the absence of a male heir, the daughter's children had succession rights. Inscription No. 60 reaffirms a daughter's right to succession and extends a similar right to the children of slaves (*thottina makkalinge*) (Rice xxv).

In the absence of corroborative historical documents indicating the practice of *sati* among the Kodavas, oral traditions offer insights. Kodava hero-songs recount two instances of immolation: one involving a servant who sacrificed himself on the funeral pyre of his master, and another of a woman who immolated herself on the funeral pyre of her lover (Nadikerianda Chinnappa 603–620). However, these songs do not glorify *sati* as an ideal of womanhood. Thus, the depiction of *sati* in the memorial stones remains a mystery.

A close reading of these inscriptions demonstrates that cultural norms are neither static nor unchanging; rather, they evolve in response to shifting socio-cultural, economic, and political factors. The concept of altruistic suicide (*nisidhi*) depicted in two inscriptions contrasts with the *sati* ideal represented in hero stones. These forms of suicide highlight the glorification of death over life during the medieval period. A deeper analysis reveals shifting norms governing women's roles. While *nisidhi* acknowledges a woman's right to salvation or sacrifice for the public good, *sati* confines her within the bounds of conjugal obligation.

The two important documents available on Kodagu's history prior to the advent of the British are the *Rajendranama*(1808), written at the behest of the reigning king of Kodagu, Viraraja Wodeyar, and the *Hukkamnamas* (royal edicts) issued from 1811–1822 by his successor, Lingaraja II. The *Rajendranama* recorded the history of the ruling dynasty from its

establishment in 1633 until 1808. Written at a time when British supremacy in South India was indisputable and small principalities faced the threat of annexation, the volume was intended to remind the British of Viraraja's generous contributions to their victory in the Anglo-Mysore wars. Since he had no male heir, Viraraja's fears of takeover were justified. He sought to secure his daughter Devamma's succession to the throne and to ensure that she received the sum of 1,70,000 Pagodas (a unit of currency) that he had invested in East India Company holdings through the British Resident, Mr. Arthur Henry Cole, in Mysore. A concise version of the *Rajendranama* was translated into English by Lt. Abercromby and circulated among British officers. The volume documented the sequence of events that led to the war with Mysore in 1780, culminating in Kodagu's entry into a defensive alliance with the British in 1792. As a political account, the volume did not describe the socio-economic life of the country. Women, including those in the royal household, remained hazy figures in the background.

Viraraja died suddenly in 1809. His daughter Devamma's claims were set aside by her uncle Lingaraja II, who ascended the throne. The British officers present in the palace did nothing to protect her rights. Lingaraja II issued a series of *Hukkamnamas* (royal edicts) between 1811 and 1820 to streamline his administration. These edicts provide insight into the land revenue system, criminal justice, defense, and management of royal properties. Since there are no other documents from the period, the *Hukkamnamas* are valuable historical resources. Of particular interest is *Hukkamnama*XXIII, which restricted forms of marriage that gave women relative autonomy. It declared short-term marriages void and children born of such relationships illegitimate:

> Hereafter, whenever a girl of the Coorg race is given in marriage she shall, if a maid, be wedded in accordance with the custom of the Coorgs, but if she has been previously a wife, she shall be

> united to her husband as the Sudras marry [i.e., without ostentatious ceremony]. These two usages are approved by the palace, and therefore shall all who give or take in marriage in these dominions observe them.
>
> Further, whenever a woman of a reputable family is kept as though she were a concubine and raiment given and children are begotten of the union, such children are not worthy to enter the Palace nor should their faces be looked on. They are fitted neither for this world nor for the next. Good people will never accept them in marriage. Having regard to these things none shall proffer or take women for raiment, but eschewing this practice shall if a maid be according to the custom of the caste and if formerly a wife, according also to usage. These are two methods enjoined and they shall be followed. (Lingaraja 27)

This law infringed on the limited rights of Kodava women to contract short-term marriages when their natal lineage lacked male heirs. It denied social legitimacy to children born of such unions and undermined Kodava customs that ensured even children born from premarital relationships received social recognition.

The reasons for this sudden interference can only be speculated upon. The Kodavas formed the backbone of administrative and military services, and close kinship bonds existed between the royal family and the Kodavas. Why, then, would the king interfere with family customs—especially when inheritance through daughters and widow remarriage were permitted within his Lingayat community? Could this attempt to curtail Kodava women's sexual autonomy have been influenced by changing social mores introduced by Christian missionaries? Alternatively, was it due to the presence of British officers residing in Kodagu

since 1772, following the signing of the Subsidiary Alliance treaty in Tellicherry to counter Tipu Sultan's aggression? As a usurper, Lingaraja II ruled under the looming threat of British annexation. Colonial records suggest that British officers were attempting to foment political discontent among the natives, which may have contributed to this interference with local customs (Richter 320).

The *Rajendranama* and the *Hukkamnamas* do not convey the full human cost of the forty-year war with Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, or how men and women experienced these calamitous events, or how Kodagu was depopulated and agricultural lands left uncultivated. To revive the economy, both Viraraja and Lingaraja II encouraged agriculturalists from other parts of South India to settle in Kodagu by offering concessional taxation on agricultural land. Viraraja also encouraged Konkani Christians, escaping incarceration by Tipu Sultan in 1792, to settle in the new township of Virajapet that he had built. He hired a priest to conduct their prayer services and later built a church for them in Virajapet. Lingaraja II also decreed that land left uncultivated for five years could be reassigned to other agriculturists (Rice 271; Lingaraja 3–16).

The price that women and children paid for men's wars and territorial ambitions can only be discerned by reading between the lines of these records and colonial sources. Women were treated as spoils of war on both sides. Soldiers who ravaged the countryside captured women and children, along with cattle and valuables, as part of their war booty (Moegling 94–95; Wilks 711–715; Richter 69).

The earliest official gazetteers on Kodagu were written by Richter (1870) and Rice (1878). They reported that, unlike many other communities, there was no resistance to girls' education among the Kodavas—even as early as 1834 (Richter 437; Rice 406–407). The village schools were co-educational, built and managed by Kodavas. That both boys and girls were sent to school was remarkable given the distances they had to walk across rough terrain

and tropical jungles inhabited by wild animals. The ethnographic sections in the gazetteers described the Kodava household, family life, and women's domestic roles in a traditional agricultural economy. As an example of women's work, they recount the story of Dodda Auwa (elderly grandmother) of Almanda House in Armeri village of Beppunadu, "who lived six generations ago." Since she was the only child of her parents, she inherited a large property. Dodda Auwa was from the Mananda family by birth (Uttacha), but she managed her property, supervised labor, and directed household affairs. Each year, the people of Armeri sent a caravan to Irkur near Cannanore to sell rice and purchase salt. In preparation, she personally ensured the bullock carts were loaded correctly and that adequate provisions were supplied for her husband and servants for the journey (Richter 122–123; Rice 221–223).

The question is, how did the 19th century authors of the gazetteers get this story of a woman who lived in the 17th century? My investigation revealed Dodda Auwa's story was first reported by Hermann Fredrich Moegling from the Basel Mission in the Madras Christian Herald.[3] She was part of the family history of the first Kodava man to convert to Christianity in 1853. Moegling's reports also documented the stories of two Kodava women who converted to Christianity to escape sexual oppression within their respective families. In the first instance, a widow named Poovakka was being compelled to marry her late sister's husband in order to continue the lineage of her natal clan. Poovakka did not wish to enter into the marriage, fearing that her son from her previous marriage might be ill-treated by the second husband. She therefore sought Moegling's help. This attempt by the Kodava *jati panchayat* to force Poovakka into marriage must be understood in the context of the Anglo-Mysore wars, which had significantly reduced the Kodava population and created an urgent need to increase childbirth.

[3] Moegling was able to establish his mission in Kodagu because of the grant money made available by General Fraser who conquered Kodagu in 1834.

In the second instance, a woman named Chiyavva was ostracized by both her natal and marital clans for committing adultery with a Poliya servant. Later, her husband Bopu from the Biddanda clan met Moegling and decided to convert to Christianity because he loved his wife more than his family (Moegling 210–11). These incidents reflect sexual norms that differed markedly from those the missionaries sought to introduce.

Moegling used these accounts in his book titled *Coorg Memoirs: An Account of Coorg and of its Mission*. Lauded as the first book on the history of Kodagu, this volume became the template for the history and ethnographic sections in the gazetteers published during the 19th and 20th centuries. The volume makes evident Moegling's disapproval of Kodava family laws and customary practices. He felt that the Kodava family life was undermined "by fraternal polyandry," which meant "a child did not know who his real father was, and that it was a secret known only to the mother" (Moegling 31-34).

The misreading of Kodava customs may also have arisen due to the classificatory kinship system among the Kodavas, by which a child referred to his father's brothers as "appa" and differentiated them from his own father by affixing terms indicating their age hierarchy in relation to his father. Apart from misinterpreting kinship terms and denigrating Kodava marriage laws, Moegling (210–216) was most critical of short-term marriages, which he viewed as a form of polyandry. His opinion on the need for reform in Kodava family life, in keeping with 19th-century Christian ideals of marriage, was shared by the colonial state. It led to the enactment of laws undermining Kodava women's entitlements in joint-family property and in marriage.

After the Mysore Wars of 1799, those who had been incarcerated by Tipu Sultan returned to Kodagu to restart their lives. This led to family conflicts over property that persisted through generations, disrupting the traditional joint family system. In 1858, the headmen of Kodava clans petitioned the British government, highlighting the "loss and ruin

caused to their ancient houses" due to fragmentation of property. In response, the Judicial Commission, in an appeal suit no. 117 (1858–59), passed a decree that division of property was contrary to the ancient custom of Coorg (Kodagu), but allowed a man to sell his share of the joint property to the other coparceners in the clan. The legal definition of coparceners of joint property excluded women. The Coorg Civil Code written by Rob Cole (20), the Superintendent of Kodagu, denied widows and unmarried daughters claims to hereditary joint-family property and only allowed them usufruct rights during their lifetime. This law, however, was not applicable to self-acquired property, and a widow was free to adopt a child to inherit her husband's property (Richter 31–32; Rice 230–231).

The Civil Code restricted Kodava women's rights in marriage. The law gave the father, and in his absence, another male relative, the right to choose a husband for a woman. It allowed a man the right to divorce his wife on grounds of proven infidelity or barrenness, but unequivocally denied a woman a similar right. The codified law regarded short-term marriage as a practice that allowed a man multiple sexual partnerships and denied children from such relationships any claims to inheritance from their father (Cole 2–6). The Civil Code also ignored customary practices that gave juridical rights to a child born of a premarital relationship, in either the clan of his/her mother or father.

Such prejudices about Kodava norms of marriage and family life were reiterated in various gazetteers of the 19th and 20th centuries. Rev. G. Richter (a missionary of the Basel Mission and later a headmaster of a vernacular school in Madikeri town) and Benjamin Lewis Rice (son of a Bishop of the London Mission Society, educator, and archaeologist) shared similar views about Kodava family life (Richter 127; Rice 225). Written as a justification for the 'enlightening mission of colonial rule,' these records poignantly indicate the silence of the marginalized—not just women but also Kodava men who did not write their history. The textual sources examined here tell us very little, for instance, about how women mediated

their lives, often impacted by the cataclysmic chain of events unleashed by men's wars and covert attacks. They tell us more about how men with the power to shape history and society circumscribed women's lives through laws that denied them their entitlements to resources and controlled their sexuality.

Representation of Kodava Women in Oral Traditions

Nineteenth-century ethnographers observed that Kodava culture and traditions were meticulously preserved in their palmes (verbal folklore) (Moegling 55; Richter 209–210; Rice 291–292). The palmes encompassed religious poems, ballads, festival songs, wedding songs, dirges, proverbs, jokes, riddles, and even lewd songs in the Kodava thakk. The challenge of interpreting folklore as a reflection of history and culture lies in its continued relevance to Kodava self-identity, indicating the intricate ways in which the past and present coalesce to shape cultural identities. While many traditional customs are obsolete, some are still practiced. Folklore is not always simplistic expressions of social attitudes or values; it often contains multiple layers of meaning. The words and their meanings are frequently reshaped and reimagined to fit the context in which they are expressed (Raheja and Gold 1–22).

This, however, does not diminish the importance of various modes of oral communication in a small, kin-based social organization, where much of the social transactions were orally conducted. Among the Kodavas, particularly in the past, all social agreements of marriage alliances, divorce, and adoption of children were typically transacted orally. The different forms of verbal communication, closely allied with non-verbal performative arts such as dance, mimes, and gestures, served as essential practices to preserve and transmit culture, tradition, and history. This was particularly significant because the

Kodavas lacked specialized memory-keepers to safeguard their cultural heritage. The chants like *Mangala Pat* (wedding songs), *Chau Pat* (lament), and *Putheri Pat* (harvest song) communicated culturally prescribed rites to the participants and listeners at these events.

Proverbs, or *palanjols* (ancient words), as they were called in the Kodava language, functioned like an unwritten constitution, mediating and guiding social relationships across age hierarchies, kinship systems, and gender relationships. Spoken in rhythmic prose, these proverbs articulated normative patterns of behavior in Kodava society. For men, the ideal was that he should die on the battlefield and for a woman, in childbirth, to attain heaven. While feminist folklorists have studied proverbs to recover women's subversive voices and experiences, their lack of historical context has excluded them from this effort to reconstruct women's historical experiences.

The sources examined for this study are hero songs and family histories on the assumption that they contain nuggets of historical experiences of the community. These sources are seen as an extension of the *manepat* tradition (song of the house), which were cultural practices designed to connect each clan with its remembered history. The hero songs examined were from a volume *Pattole Palame* containing folklore collated by Chinnappa in 1924 out of concern for the loss of cultural memories due to rapid social change in Kodagu. Written in the Kodava Takk using Kannada script, the volume is accepted by the Kodavas as an authentic account of their culture. It represents the first attempt by a Kodava to collate and document the community's oral traditions.

The family histories examined here were preserved in the genealogical records maintained by some families in Kannada or English in small booklets or handwritten in notebooks. Indubitably, the two forms of memory-keeping were controlled by men, who shaped the representation of women. Yet, these were the only resources that could provide some insights into women's lived lives in history.

Hero Songs

The hero songs are historical biographies of a hero chanted during ancestor worship in the hero's ancestral house or in the village meadow. The narrative format of these songs was similar to those performed during life-cycle rituals and festivals. Their simple narrative structure was intended to aid mnemonic recall. Chanted to the monotonous beat of the kettledrums by four men, these hero songs are believed to be old. They reflected the cultural ethos of heroism depicted in the *vira kallu*/*kolle kalus* (hero stones) commemorating heroic deeds. The serious intent of this narrative tradition is evident from the *Deshakett Pat*, a seventeenth-century song that documents the administrative organization of Kodagu under the Ikkeri dynasty established in 1633. The song also records names of various Kodava clans who held hereditary rights to govern each village and the larger political divisions of Kodagu. The hero songs do not refer to a centralized authority of the king and recount events when Kodagu comprised warring chiefs, rather than a unified kingdom.

The hero songs revealed certain facets of history not documented in textual sources. Apart from describing in exquisite detail women's work in an agricultural economy, they highlight a thriving rice trade with Malabar and cattle marketing in Mysore. Interestingly, these songs also indicate that salt was an essential commodity for an inland region and was used as part of the wages paid to agricultural workers. This evidence of trade challenges the nineteenth-century ethnographic portrayal of Kodagu as socio-culturally isolated. Furthermore, the women depicted in these epic songs were not passive figures, but assertive working women seen manuring the paddy fields or fetching firewood from the forests.

The story of *The Woman Who Killed a Tiger*, a subplot in the hero song entitled *Polladevira Appaya*, celebrated the bravery of Appaya, a member of the Polladeivira clan from Yedenad (a small principality in Kodagu). Ironically, the poem glorified Appaya's feat in killing a tiger and successfully escaping from Beppunadu, an enemy principality also

located in Kodagu, but paid scant attention to the woman called Chiyyavva from the Kelappanda clan, who also killed a tiger and challenged male authority on a point of law. Chiyyavva, a member of the Kelapanda clan, had to fetch wood from the forest when she saw a sleeping tigress with her two cubs. Chiyyavva sharpened a stout stick, speared the tigress, and carried the cubs with her. She felt that her courage deserved recognition in the village community and, therefore, went to the village commons, where men were assembled, and said, "Heroes assembled here, I have a case to be decided. If a man killed a tiger, the *Ojas* (a silk scarf symbolizing power) is tied to his rifle, where should the silk scarf be tied when a woman kills a tiger?" The men replied, "There was no precedent in law entitling a woman to the honour of killing a tiger." Angered by this reply, Chiyyavva threw the tiger's tail before the men and said, "Henceforth, when a woman kills a tiger, the scarf of honour should be tied to her head." She then gathered the villagers (the potters and other artisans) and celebrated her heroic achievement with traditional pomp. Chiyyavva had a cage built for the cubs and reared them. The tigers escaped the cage and attacked the livestock owned by women…

Part two of this song recounted Mathanda Kodachi's efforts to facilitate the men of Beppunad to capture Polladevira Appayya, their enemy: 500 milch cows and 100 steers belonging to the Mathanda clan were grazing in the meadows when one of the escaped tigers attacked the milch cow named Bollu. The landlord, Cherimana from the Mathanda clan, organized a hunting expedition with 500 men to kill the tiger, but failed. Therefore, despite the ongoing feud between Yedenad and Beppunad, Appayya was invited to kill the tiger. Appayya stealthily entered Beppunad, killed the tiger, and cut the tiger's tail as proof of his valour before returning to his country. Discovering the dead tiger, the villagers carried it to the village and honoured the landlord, Cherimana, from the Mathanda clan. Mathanda Kodachi was offended. Accompanied by servants, she went to the village meadows, where men were gathered. She threw down her pot and harangued them, "You are not men, but

dogs; when Polladevira Appaya was celebrating his valour with the tiger's tail, you are trying to emulate him with the carcass of a tailless tiger."

The third part of this hero song described the capture and clever escape of the hero, Polladevira Appayya: Appayya had seen Mathanda Kodachi while she was manuring the paddy fields and had fallen in love with her. Despite the danger of capture by an enemy country, he returned to Beppunad and approached Mathanda Kodachi. Seeing this as an opportunity to capture an enemy of her country, she enticed him home, plied him with liquor and, when inebriated, she sang to her compatriots, "Oh Beppunadu men! I have tied the runaway bullock to the byre, come surround him in three circles." Appayya was alerted. He killed Mathanda Kodachi and tried to escape, but was captured... The rest of the narrative described Appayya's clever escape from his enemies (Chinnappa 619–641).

Another hero song entitled *Aiyyakovira Appiah* commemorated the life and death of the hero Appiah belonging to the Aiyyakovira clan, living in Kuyya. Appiah was a handsome young man desired by all the young women in Kuyya. Wanting to make something of his life, he went to Mysore for the purchase of cattle and then to Malabar to sell rice. En route to Malabar, he halted in Murnad near the paddy fields belonging to the Bonnira clan. Bonira Chembavva, who was manuring the paddy fields, fell in love with Appiah. She spoke to him and invited him to her home. Appiah spent the night with Chembavva and left the next day with the promise to marry her on his return. Chembavva warned him to be careful, since all the young men of her village wished to marry her, especially Madayanda Devvaya. When Devvaya heard about the affair, he was furious and decided to have Appiah killed on his return to Murnad. Appiah was ambushed by Devvaya's servant, but despite his injuries, he killed his attacker. Hearing of his injuries, Chembavva rushed to his side, nursed him, and later accompanied him to his home in Kuyya saying that she did not wish to live in Murnad, a land of sinners. On reaching home, Appiah introduced Chembavva to his mother as his wife

before dying. The grief-stricken Chembavva jumped into his funeral pyre (Chinnappa, 1924, trans. 2003, pp. 603–620).

The internal evidence for the historical authenticity of these accounts can only be guessed from the references in them to the clans still living in Kodagu and from the fact that these are chanted in the ancestral homes of the heroes referred to in the song. Moreover, no attempt has been made to dramatize the narrative. These songs cannot be dismissed as allegorical tales since the protagonists are referred to by Kodava clan names and are in usage.

Family History

Family stories and genealogies recounted during clan get-togethers and ancestor worship are vital for the maintenance of clan identity and unity, especially because the Kodavas are ancestor worshippers. The story of the founder of the clan, referred to as *Mula Purusha* or *Karnava* (first ancestor), does not refer to a mythical past but to the medieval period when South India saw the rapid expansion of the agricultural economy. Ancestors were remembered for their acquisition of vast tracts of agricultural land and the hereditary privileges they earned through their valour. Others referred to events that occurred during enemy attacks or family conflicts, resulting in death and ruin to clans. In continuation of this tradition, some families have maintained genealogical records from the 19th century, documenting marriage alliances and achievements such as the first person to learn English, open a coffee estate, or attain a high post.

The antiquity of this tradition can be seen from the account of Dodda Auwa, a 17th-century woman, and six generations of her descendants, recounted by the first Kodava Christian, Almanda Somiya (later called Stephanas), to Moegling. The social significance of this narrative tradition can be traced to the felt need in a kin-based society to remember affinal alliances and other details concerning the clan. Almanda Somiya's narration of his ancestry indicated that Dodda Auwa had four daughters, three of whom were married to men

from neighbouring clans, while the youngest contracted a short-term marriage with a man from the Palecanda clan. In acknowledgement of this marriage, the Almanda clan offered oblations to their Palecanda ancestor, and after the marriage, matrimonial alliances between the two clans were not supposed to occur.

Within this tradition of family histories, women were largely remembered for their sacrifices rather than for their achievements. The Ichettira clan history contained the story of the courage of two women in the 17th century who saved their lineage from extinction when their house was set on fire by a neighbouring chieftain, Utthu Nayak. The two women broke open the window and handed two children, Pooviah and Appiah, to servants for safety. These children were smuggled to the Ballachanda house in the neighbouring village. When the children grew up, they claimed their inheritance.

The following family histories refer to incidents that occurred during the 18th-century Anglo-Mysore wars. The first recounts Keethyanda Somiah's escape from captivity with his aunt's help during the Anglo-Mysore wars. The invaders had burnt down the Keepyanda *ainmane* and abducted Somiah and his aunt. At great personal risk, the aunt engineered Somiah's escape to ensure the continuity of the clan and the lineage. Another tragic story is part of the Kuttetira family history—Kuttetira Somanna's son, Muttanna, was abducted by Tippu Sultan's army. Somanna sought help from the British to rescue his son. The king of Kodagu, however, saw Somanna as a dangerous corroborator and decreed that he should be nailed to a tree in the Siddhi Forest, and that his wife, Accava, and son should be enslaved. To avoid ignominy, Accava and her son committed suicide. Many members of the Kuttetira clan were also imprisoned and saved through the intercession of Cherimana's son, Kuttiah, who had fought in the Katkai-Amar Suliya war in 1799.

Not all the stories recall incidents that occurred during wars. There are others that reveal the vulnerability of women within their homes. Biddanda Bopu, who became a famous

general during the Mysore wars, was born in 1769 on Vinayak Chathurthi day. His father, Medappa, considered the child inauspicious and divorced his mother. The real reason for the divorce was that Medappa desired to marry Kunikakka, his widowed cousin. Bopu was brought up by his mother's family until his father and stepmother died, and then rejoined his father's clan. A generation later, the genealogical table recorded the abandonment of a baby girl. Biddanda Bopu's son, Somiah, was born in 1800, and when he grew up, he joined the services of Chikka-Viraraja. Somiah was married to Subbavva from the Nadikeranda clan and had nine children by her. After her death, Somiah married her sister Poovakka. When Chikka-Viraraja was deposed and exiled to Banaras in 1834, Somiah chose to accompany his king in exile, rather than serve the British. In exile, his wife Poovakka gave birth to a baby girl, named Kunniakka. Somiah 'gave this child as charity' [sic] to the Shivchari Mutt (a holy order).

Conclusion

This examination of Kodava women's historical experiences in textual and oral sources highlights the selectivity of historical recall, often shaped by male-dominated narratives. It reveals how 'memory-keeping' methods—writing, archiving, and oral traditions—have documented men's perspectives and experiences. Attempts to excavate women's experiences from these sources often expose how men have portrayed women's lives, reflecting the politics of historical representation.

Colonial sources often denigrate customary marriage practices, not out of genuine concern for women, but to justify the 'enlightening mission' of colonial rule. Both textual and oral sources demonstrate a lack of sensitivity in portraying women's lived realities. War narratives in indigenous and colonial records treated women and cattle as spoils of war, while family histories selectively commemorated women only when their sacrifices served the greater good of the family. Orally transmitted historical narratives undoubtedly enrich history,

but present challenges due to the lack of chronological anchoring and their susceptibility to manipulation by contemporary political ideologies.

Nevertheless, by interweaving textual and oral literature, glimpses of women emerge—women who defied conventions, killed tigers, ridiculed men, challenged an assembly of men on a legal point, and assisted their country in the capture of enemies. The extent to which women's lived experiences can be recovered from these sources remains an open and critical question for historiography. But orally transmitted narratives found in hero songs and family histories cannot be dismissed as allegorical tales.

References

Boverianda Chinnappa & Nanjamma. *Animanes of Kodagu*: *Ancestral Homes of Kodagu and their Socio-cultural Significance.* Niyogi. Pub. 2014. Pp.15-25.

Chinnappa, Nadikeranda. *Patole Palme*, 1924. Trans. Boverianda Nanjamma & Chinnappa. Rupa and Co. 2003.pp. 56-140, 603-620, 619-641, 603-626.

Chowdhury, Indira. 'Oral Traditions and Contemporary History: Events, Memory, Experience and Representation,' *EPW* Vol. 49 (No.30).2014. pp.39-42.

Chowdhry, Prem. *The Veiled Women: Shifting Gender Equations in Rural Haryana (1880-1990)*. Oxford. 1994.

Cole, Rob. (1871). *Manual of Coorg Civil Law*. Mysore Residency Press (Reprint1947). pp. 13, 2-7, 20.

Emaneau, M.B. "Kinship and Marriage among the Coorgs.*"* (pp. 123-147). *JRASB* (4). 1938. pp.123-147.

Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Traditions and Verbal Arts*. Routledge 2012. p.3.

Government of India. *Gazetteer of India: Karnataka State* (Kodagu District) Govt. of Karnataka. 1993. p103.

Hunter, W.W. *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, *Cochin to Ganuria.* Truber & Co. Vol. IV. 1885.

pp. 28-48.

Iyer, Krishan. *Caste in India: Its Nature, Function and Origin*. L.K. Balaratnam.1948. pp.5-8.

Kosambi, D.D. *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture.* Popular Prakash 1962. (Reprint 1983). pp. 1-11.

Moegling, H. *Coorg Memories: An Account of Coorg and of the Coorg Mission*. Wesleyan Mission Press. 1855. pp. 94-95, 210-11, 216, 31-34.

Raheja, Godwin Gloria. *Songs, Stories, Lives: Gendered Dialogue and Cultural Critiques*. Kali for Women. 2003.

Rao, Gururaj B.K. *Megalithic Cultures of South India.* University of Mysore 1972. p.54.

Rice, Bejamin Lewis. *Mysore and Coorg: A Gazetteer Compiled for the Government of India*. (Vol 3). Mysore Government Press. 1878. (Reprint 2004) pp. 203, 221-223, 271, 406-407,221-223, 230-231, 271.

— *Epigraphic Carnatica (Vol. I) Coorg District.* Institute of Kannada Studies, Manasa Gangotri University 1972. (first published 1868). pp. xxv,

Richter. G. (1870) *Gazetteer of Coorg: Natural Features of the Country and the Social and Political Conditions of its Inhabitants*. BR. Publication. 1870. (reprint 1984). pp.230,131-135,320, 69, 437,122-123, 31-32, 69,

Srinivas, M.N. *Religion and Society of the Coorgs in South India*. Oxford University Press, 1952 (reprint 2003). pp. 6-7.

Sontheimer, Gunther-Dietz. *Pastoral Deities in Western India*, (translated by Feldhaus Anne). Oxford University Press. 1989. pp. 3-18.

Thapar, Romila. *Somanatha: The Many Voices of History.* Penguin Books. 2004. P215

--- *Indian Culture as Heritage: Contemporary Pasts*. Aleph.2018. p. 52

Wilks, Mark. *History of Mysore*, (Vol. 1 & II). Asian Educational Service,1810 (reprint, 1989) pp.711-715.

Wodiyar, Lingaragendra. *The Hukkamnama of Lingarajendra Wodiyar, Raja of Coorg 1811-1820.* (Trans. Curvengen 1911). Coorg District Press. p.27

Wodiyar, Virarajendra. *Rajendranama*: *History of Coorg from 1633-1808*. Krishnaya. D N. (Ed.). Shri Cauvery Publication (First pub 1809, this edition, 1958).

Bionote: Professor Veena Poonacha is the former Director of the Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT Women's University, Mumbai. She has contributed significantly to the growth of women's studies scholarship, through her research, publications and teaching. Her doctoral research is on "Women in Coorg Society: A Study of Status and Experiences through the Use of Proverbs, Folk Songs, Oral Histories and Genealogies." She has been awarded research fellowships by the University of British Colombia, Canada in 1997 and by the Australia-India Council in 2008. She was a visiting faculty in the University of Regina, Canada. Her publications include *From the Land of a Thousand Hills: Portraits of Three Women of Coorg (Kodagu) in South India*, 2002.