

## Contribution of Kodavas to the Indian Armed Forces

Hema M.A.<sup>#,\*</sup> and Jitendra Kumar Singh<sup>§</sup>

<sup>#</sup>Indian Institute of Psychology and Research (IIPR), Bengaluru Central University, Bengaluru - 560 095, India.

<sup>§</sup>DRDO-Defence Institute of Psychological Research (DIPR), Delhi - 110 054, India

\*Email: hemamythili22@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

Identity is a dynamic phenomenon constructed as a collective product of the actions, interactions, cognition and self-cognizance of human beings. In exploring identity as a product of individual factors and contextual - historical factors embedded in a socio-political context, this paper focuses on the contribution of the Kodavas, a community who form a substantial minority in the Kodagu (Coorg) district of Karnataka to the Indian Armed Forces. Speaking a separate language, adhering to a clan-based social structure, following a belief system that is at substantial variance to other parts of the state, and at times even asserting a historical origin exterior to India, the group carries a larger number of markers that has led them to be regarded and portrayed as one of India's groups of 'internal exotics'. Based on literature, this paper aims to bring to light the historical relationship of this community with the Armed Forces. Further, the paper also initiates a discussion on the current status of military fervor among the Kodava youth and the necessary measures to be taken to uphold the warrior spirit of the Kodavas.

**Keywords:** Kodavas; Armed forces; Identity

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Identity is the product of a combination of cultural, genetic and social components along with elements of the built in environment of an individual. The history of the etymology of the word "identity" comes from a Latin word 'idem' which then changed into 'identitas', meaning "same". However, in contemporary times, identity is known as the "quality of being identical" which derives the framework for self-identity, the inner world of an individual resistant to changes in the outer environment<sup>1</sup>. The environmental fold includes 'places' which are essentially "centers of meaning constructed out of lived experience"<sup>2</sup>. The significance of a place in shaping the identity of a person is enormous. Hence, this paper aims at exploring and bringing to light the magnanimity of one such place in India, 'Coorg' which has been influential in the military proficiency of the country.

### 2. COORG AND THE KODAVAS

Coorg, a place known as the 'Scotland of India' and 'Kashmir of Southern India'<sup>3</sup> is located along the Western Ghats of Karnataka encompassing its mesmerising scenic beauty. In addition to the topographical and geographical distinctiveness, the tiny district in the map of India<sup>4</sup> is a home to an ethnic group called the 'Kodavas'. The identity of the Kodavas is derived from a multitude of diverse attributes which include, language, religion, race, cultural traits, a sense of shared history, as well as powerful symbols associated with

the group. These features serve to reinforce and perpetuate their subjective feeling of belongingness to the group by giving the individuals a feeling of pride in its unique character, continuity with the past, and survival beyond the self<sup>5</sup>. The credit to this effect can be bestowed on the 200 years of rule by the Lingayat Kings. This tenure was successful in moulding the cultural history of Coorg by uniting the conglomeration of mutually warring petty chiefdoms under one rule for the first time, thus, giving the Kodavas a unique cultural identity<sup>6</sup>.

The societal structure of the Kodavas is based on the framework of family based communities. Each family called an 'okka' is a cohesive patrilineal clan descended from a common ancestor<sup>7</sup>. Further, the members of an okka are identified by a common family name called the 'Mane pedha' and an ancestral house called the 'Aine Mane', which is headed by the eldest male member called the 'Pattedar'. Several okkas within a specified geographical boundary forms a village called the 'Ur'. The composition of an 'Ur' can be conceptualised like satellite families since the nearest neighbour of the household lived at a considerable distance away, perhaps on the other side of the hill or valley. Several Urs together form a larger vicinity called the 'Nad' and a number Nads comprised of a wider boundary called the 'Sime'. Till date, the okka (family) holds special social relevance for a Kodava. An exhibit of this bearing lies in the way in which the Kodavas identify themselves with their 'Mane pedha', irrespective of their location of residence. They also take pride in getting together in their ancestral house during any significant occasions including festivals, marriages, births and deaths.

An important and special observation is that, despite

perceiving themselves as part of the Hindu fold, the Kodavas neither utilise the services of brahmin priests in their religious ceremonies, nor do they owe allegiance to any other religious authority within or outside the district. Additionally, while festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi, Dussehra, Diwali are celebrated with great pomp in most of the regions of Karnataka, the Kodavas celebrate three major festivals, namely, Kailpod, Puttari and Kaveri Sankramana which accounts to the practice of ancestral and nature worship among the Kodavas. The difference in the nature of celebrations may also owe its allegiance to their mainstay economy being paddy cultivation until the introduction of coffee by the British in 1845<sup>6</sup>. Both the occupations draw them closer to the nature and thus, its reverence. However today, coffee has steadily taken over the economy of the community, making Coorg the major contributor (51 %) of coffee in Karnataka, thus adding to the 4 per cent output from the India to the global market<sup>8</sup>.

The vividness of this community is further exuberated with their language and attire. Comparative Dravidian studies have shown that Kodava belongs to the South Dravidian Language group. But, linguistically, Kodava language shows some deviations from the rest of the Dravidian languages. Along with 5 short vowels and 5 long vowels, the Kodava language also has two extra vowels – high central unrounded vowels and mid-central unrounded vowels<sup>9</sup>. In addition, their clothing is also different and well suited to the terrain of the region, thus, contributing to the identity markers of this community.

## 2.1 Kodavas – A Martial Race

The history of Kodavas has been explained from various theoretical perspectives. Among the many, one of the theories locate Kodavas to be the original inhabitants of Coorg belonging to a martial kshatriya clan<sup>10</sup>. A second theory, traces Kodavas to the foot-soldiers of Alexander the Great<sup>11</sup>. A common line of argument in both the theories is the orientation of the community to warfare. This is further supported by the observations of Rice (1878:221-23), that, the men of Coorg enjoyed hunting and warlike sports. Further, the hunter who killed a tiger was entitled to ceremonial honour called ‘Nari mangala’, which literally means ‘marriage with the tiger’. To the list of rewards for success in warfare also adds the incentive of a piece of land called ‘Jamma’ land. The Hukkamnamas issued by Lingaraja, between 1811-1820, shows that the hereditary (Jamma) land was linked to military service (Hukkamnama XIII, translated Curgenvan 1911:18)<sup>6</sup> which led the Kodavas to seek military appointments. Nevertheless, the impartible nature of ‘Jamma’ by law, is one of the reasons for the cohesive existence of the okka even in the present times (Baden 1974:465-82)<sup>6</sup>. The Kodavas also enjoy exemption from the Arms Act which otherwise prohibited possessing arms without license. To this end, it is argued that “Kodavas are the only community in India” who were exempted from the Indian Arms Act<sup>12</sup>.

The soldier in a Kodava is an integral part of their normal life, represented across their attire, rituals at marriage, festivals and feats. The attire of the men includes a black Kupaya with a red chale tied around the waist, which also holds a knife called the ‘Peeche kathi’. The warrior bridegroom also carries another broad sword called the ‘Odi kathi’. This weapon is an essential

equipment at a ceremony called the ‘Bale kettuva’ which is a symbolic representation of beheading the enemies on the way to the bride. Furthermore, to celebrate the possession and use of weapons, the Kodavas have a festival called ‘Kailpod’ where they offer prayers to the weapons and also hold a feat called ‘Bodi namme’ (Feat of Bullets).

In appreciation of the military competency displayed by the Kodavas during the British rule, they were identified to be one of the groups belonging to the ‘martial race’<sup>13</sup>. The idea of ‘martial race’ was popularised by the British during the nineteenth century, referring to some groups of men who had better capacities owing to their biological or cultural predispositions<sup>14</sup>. As the military system evolved, in modern India, the 37 Medium regiment was the ‘Coorg Regiment’<sup>15</sup> which along with other South Indian Communities was looked up and heroically vindicated that in their veins flows the blood of martial ancestors<sup>16</sup>.

## 2.2 History of Military Prowess of the Kodavas

“Our Army’s history is incomplete without knowing the valour of Kodava warriors like Cariappa and Thimayya who are commanded for their leadership and inspiration,” was a statement reported in the *Buisness Standard* (2017)<sup>17</sup>. After the Indian independence in 1947, Field Marshal K. M. Cariappa was the first Commander-in-Chief to lead the Armed forces of independent India. He was a decorated officer, recipient of the ‘Order of the British Empire’. He is one of the two officers who were conferred the five-star rank of Field Marshall in 1986, prior to S.H.F.J. ‘Sam’ Manekshaw. Another officer from Coorg who is adorned for his exemplary contributions to the Indian Armed Forces is General K. S. Thimayya, who was the only Indian to command an infantry brigade in World War II. The tradition of service continues even today with Colonel Bommanda Dhiraj Chengappa, the officer who commands the President’s bodyguards<sup>18</sup>. In honour of the outstanding contributions of this community to the country’s defence sector, Coorg is also called the ‘Land of Generals’<sup>19</sup>.

The culture and traditions of the Kodavas always honour and respect the women as equals. A Kodava woman is an epitome of strength who is known to work at par with the men<sup>20</sup>. The contribution of the Kodava women to the Indian Armed Forces can be traced back to pre-independent times with Mandaneravanda Rajeshwari being the first Kodava lady flying officer (Pilot) of the Indian Air Force. Without missing a step, the Kodava women have continued to take the legacy forward even in the twenty first century. Recently, Coluvanda Punya Nanjappa was the only girl from Karnataka to be part of the year’s course in flying branch of the Air Force Academy<sup>21</sup> and Dr. Inanda B. Kaveramma has become the only Kodava lady Flight Lieutenant who is serving as a doctor in the Indian Air Force<sup>22</sup>.

## 3. IMPLICATIONS OF MILITARY COMPETENCE OF THE KODAVAS

To every Kodava household, it is a matter of pride to own atleast one individual who serves in the Armed Forces. This endures inferences at various levels for the individual as well as for the country. The social perspective views the

Kodavas at a different pedestal than their neighbours. The history of involvement of the community in warfare plays to be a significant reason for this reception. At a geographical front, the terrain in which the land of the Kodavas is located in combination with the physical characteristics of the Kodavas serve as a means to mould the personality of these individuals to prepare for the unexpected. This in turn shapes the physical and mental attitude of the Kodavas towards military service. These topographical, historical and social factors influence the psychological attributes of the Kodavas with higher level of confidence, motivation, self-esteem and leadership qualities. Such a psychological mindset has great implications at the national level: Individuals with a legacy of pride in warfare, a community with a historical background of superiority in service, and finally, people with the urge, motivation and willingness to sculpt an identity, personal, social and national. But, the reality says otherwise, to be further elaborated with due consideration to the modern eminence of the notion of military service to the Kodavas.

#### 4. CURRENT STATUS

The Kodavas took pride in serving two of their own regiments in the Indian Armed Forces. To accommodate the great number in which the Kodavas adorned the olive green uniform, the British redesignated the 11<sup>th</sup> Maratha Infantry as the 71<sup>st</sup> Coorg Rifles in 1903<sup>23</sup>. In a second attempt, the Coorg Regiment was advocated in 1996<sup>24</sup>. But, the misfortune lies in both these celebrated regiments being merged with greater regiments in the course of time. While on one hand, the Kodava youth who are joining the forces are still continuing to bring laurels to the community, the numbers of induction are low. In this regard, a major concern expressed by the ex-servicemen of Coorg is the ‘diminishing lure of the military upon youth in Kodagu’<sup>19</sup>. The experts have attributed the possible reasons for the declining number of Kodava officers in the Indian Armed Forces to the dwindling population of the community, migration and government apathy which is effecting the social and cultural fabric of the community<sup>24</sup>.

#### 5. DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In lieu of the declining trend in the induction of Kodavas to the Armed Forces, further research might be essential to explore the attributes that form the martial identity of the Kodavas. This can facilitate further intervention to strengthen the Kodava identity. With regard to migration being cited as one of the reason for the weakening appeal of military service to the Kodava youth, the detachment from the place is likely to cause a loss of meaning associated with the place resulting in the loss of identity<sup>2</sup>. Research efforts aimed at enhancing the enticement of the place, Coorg, would be effective in reinforcing the warrior identity of the Kodavas. Further, inclusion of local history as part of the school curriculum is recognised as an operational tool to establish one’s identity<sup>25</sup>. In this regard, the learning of students through the curriculum could be complemented with efforts made by local organisations/associations like the ‘Kodava Samaja’ to organise workshops aimed at narrating the history of the Kodavas. This would help in developing the necessary identity consciousness at a young

age which would further reflect in the course of life of the Kodavas in the future.

#### 6. CONCLUSION

Greater the relationship between the society and army, higher is the motivation and interest towards a military career<sup>26</sup>. But, the inclination of the Kodavas speak a different tale. The present paper aimed to bring to light a community which has a historical relationship with the Armed Forces. But, the truth of the matter lies in the diminishing path of the then ‘martial race’ in choosing military service as a choice of career in the modern day. With an attempt to uncover the concealed implications of the service of this community, this paper also provides directions for concentrated effort towards reviving the warrior spirit of the Kodavas.

#### REFERENCES

1. Qazimi, S. Sense of place and place identity, *Eur. J. Soc. Sci.*, 2014, **1**(1), 306 – 311. ISSN 2411-9563 (Print) ISSN 2312-8429 (Online)
2. Ujang, N. & Zakariya, K. The notion of place, Place meaning and identity in urban regeneration, *Soc. Behav. Sci.*, 2015, **170**, 709–717. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.01.073.
3. Uthappa, N.D. Political culture of the coorgs. *Econ. Political Wkly.*, 1970, **5**(18), 748 – 751. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4359938>. (Accessed on 18 June 2019).
4. Lalitha, K.P. Unique tribes of Coorg. *Int. J. Res. Humanit. Soc. Stud.*, 2015, **2**(10), 61 – 65. ISSN 2394-6288 (Print) & ISSN 2394-6296 (Online).
5. De Vos, G. Dimensions of self in Japanese culture. In *Culture and Self*, edited by A. Marsella, G. De Vos, & F. L. K. Hsu. Tavistock, London, 1985, pp. 149 – 184.
6. Ritcher, G. Gazetteer of Coorg. Low price publications, Delhi, 2014.
7. Poonacha, V. Rites de passage of matrescence and social construction of motherhood: Coorgs in South India. *Econ. Political Wkly.*, 1997, **32**(3), 101 – 110. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4404990>. (Accessed on 18 June 2019).
8. Sunanda, H.S. & Nagaraja, N. An Over-view of coffee production and productivity in Karnataka. *Int. J. Eng. Manage. Res.*, 2014, **4**(4), 348 – 358.
9. Rajyashree, K.S. Kodava speech community: An ethnolinguistic study, *Language in India*, 2001, **1**(6), 1–10. [www.languageinindia.com/oct2001/kodavarajyashree.html](http://www.languageinindia.com/oct2001/kodavarajyashree.html). (Accessed on 17 June 2019).
10. Assadi, M. Separatist movement in Coorg. *Econ. Political Wkly.*, 1997, **32**(49), 3114 – 3116. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4406148>. (Accessed on 18 June 2019).
11. Ponnappa, K.L. A Study of the origin of the Coorgis, Cheltali, Kodagu, 1997.
12. Vijaya, T.P. The Jamma land holders of Coorg and the politics of Indian Arms Act, *Econ. Political Wkly.*, 1993, **54**, 526 - 537. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44143025>. (Accessed on 18 June 2019).
13. Mudaliyar, K. & Chowdhury, P.G. Re-imagining the melting pot and the golden door – A cachet portrayal of cultural identity and multiculturalism in ‘The Scent of Pepper’, *Int. J. Trend Res. Dev. (IJTRD)*, 2018,

- URL: <http://www.ijtrd.com/papers/IJTRD16054.pdf> . (Accessed on 18 June 2019).
14. Stanik, P. Martial race ideology in the nineteenth-century British Empire, *Folio*, 2017, **3**, 42 – 47. URL: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318645756>. (Accessed on 17 June 2019).
  15. Gautam, P.K. The Cholas: Some enduring issues of statecraft, military matters and international relations, *J. Def. Stud.*, 2013, **7**(4), 47 – 62. ISSN 0976-1004 print.
  16. Daniels, J.R., The black Pom-Poms: History of the Madras Regiment 1941–1983, Madras Regimental Centre, Coonor, 1986, p. iv.
  17. IANS. (2017, November 3). Army Chief to unveil Cariappa, Thimmaya's statues in Karnataka's Kodagu. *Buisness Standard*, p. 1.
  18. A proud moment. (2017, July 25). *Star of Mysore*. <https://starofmysore.com/a-proud-moment/>. (Accessed on 28 October 2019).
  19. Aroor, S. Field Marshal Cariappa's son rues fading of military lure in the 'Land of Generals', *India Today*. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/field-marshal-cariappa-son-rues-fading-of-military-lure-in-the-land-of-generals-1226820-2018-05-04>. (Accessed on 17 September 2019).
  20. Achayya, B. The Kodava Woman: A Woman of substance. <https://www.evolveback.com/coorg/the-kodava-woman-a-woman-of-substance/>. (Accessed on 29 October 2019).
  21. Mysore girl selected as trainee pilot of IAF flying branch. *Star of Mysore*. <https://starofmysore.com/mysuru-girl-selected-as-trainee-pilot-of-iaf-flying-branch/>. (Accessed on 08 October 2019).
  22. Doctor promoted as Flight Lieutenant. *Star of Mysore*, 2019. <https://starofmysore.com/doctor-promoted-as-flight-lieutenant/>. (Accessed on 28 October 2019).
  23. Kumar, C. Kripper, Thimayya and Hanamanthappa, Karnataka gives India more brave hearts. *The Times of India*, 2016. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/Kripper-Thimayya-and-Hanamanthappa-Karnataka-gives-India-More-bravehearts/articleshow/51086572.cms>. (Accessed on 17 September 2019).
  24. Aiyappa, M. Why Kodavas, who once blazed through the hockey pitch and Army Battles, are abandoning both, *The Times of India*, 2019. [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/69482855.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/69482855.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst). (Accessed on 29 October 2019).
  25. Hawkey, K. History teaching and the council of Europe. *Teaching History*, 1995, **78**, 17-19. ISSN: 00400610.
  26. Grigorov, G. & Spiridonov, S. Research on the motivation for choosing the military career. *In proceedings of the International Conference Knowledge – Based Organisation*, 2018, **XXIV**(1), 302 – 307. doi: 10.1515/kbo-2018-0048.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Ms Hema M.A.** is an Assistant Professor of Psychology in the Indian Institute of Psychology and Research (IIPR), Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. Her areas of interest include Clinical Psychology, Social Psychology and Positive Psychology. Contributed in conceptualising and writing the paper.

**Dr Jitendra Kumar Singh** Received his Ph.D. from University of Delhi. Currently working as Scientist 'E' in DRDO-DIPR, Delhi. His areas of interest are personality, political psychology, positive psychology and qualitative research method. Contributed in conceptualising and editing the manuscript.