

# **Ethnic identity and intangible cultural heritage- A study of Koraga community of south India**

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# Introduction

- **The tribal communities of India represent an important social category of Indian social structure. The tribals are said to be the original inhabitants of India. India is a country of multiracial stock. Different types of groups occupy different parts of India having their own cultural characteristics and levels of development. A number of groups are still referred to as tribals, primitives, *Adivasis* and so on. The tribal population in India according to the 1991 census was 67.76 million. This was almost equal to the population of Briton, At present India has the second largest tribal population in the world next only to Africa. Tribes in India spread over the lengthy and breadth of the country.**

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**Tribes in Indian context are generally referred to in the language of Indian constitution as ‘Scheduled tribes’. It was Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the Chairman of the drafting committee of the constitution ,who preferred the concept of scheduled tribe to Adivasis( C.N. Shankar Rao 2004 Pp 342) for it enumerates the tribes and hence has a specific meaning.**

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- **The scheduled tribes constitute the second largest group of the backward classes that come under what is known as the 'un privileged' section of the populace (ibid) According to the 1991 census report the 'scheduled tribes' constitute 8.8% of the total population of India. The tribal people or the Adivasis who are considered as the earliest inhabitants have survived here with their unchanging ways of life and culture for centuries. Many of them are still in a primitive stage and are far from the impact of modern civilization**
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# Definition of 'tribe'

- The term “scheduled tribe” has been explained in many ways. To the ordinary people the word suggests simple folk living in the hills and forests, for others, it signifies a colorful people famous for their dance and song, to an administrator it means a group of citizens who are the special responsibilities of the President of India, to an anthropologist it indicated a special field for study of as social phenomenon. Article 366 (25) of Indian Constitution says that Scheduled tribes are the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities which the Indian President may specify by public notification under Article 342(1) some definitions are-
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- **A tribe is a collection of families bearing a common name , members of which occupy the same territory, speak the same language and observe certain taboos regarding marriage, profession or occupation and have developed a well assessed system of reciprocity and mutuality of obligation”- D.N. Majumdar’**
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- **“ A tribe is a collection of families bearing a common name , speaking a common dialect, occupying or professing to occupy a common territory and is not usually endogamous, though originally it might have been so” - Imperial Gazetteer of India.**
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- **“Tribe is an ethnic category, defined by real or putative descent and characterized by a corporate identity and a wide range of commonly shared traits of culture”- S.C. Dube’**
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- **The above mentioned definitions as well as other definitions show the characteristics of tribe such as –**
  - **Common territory**
  - **Collection of families**
    - **Common name**
  - **Common language( dialect)**
    - **Common ancestor**
    - **Common religion**
    - **Feeling of unity**
  - **Common economic organization**
    - **Organization of Clans**
    - **Endogamous group**
    - **Common culture**

- **Above features are matching to Koragas , an ethnic tribe of south India. The Koraga community of Karnataka and Kerala states of southern parts of India is considered as one of the most primitive communities of India. Koragas fall under the category of Tribe. The etymological meaning of the word is not clear. However the scholars have observed that Koraga may be a corrupt form of the word Kuruvar ( Hill Man) Scholars also opined that the name is indicative of sun worship. It may be noted that the cultural heritage also throws some light in this direction. According to the 1981 census the population of Koraga was 15146. They speak Koraga dialect. The territory of this primitive tribe is the old Tulu nadu ( Tulu speaking area) which falls under present Kerala and Karnataka states.**

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- **Koragas fall under proto Dravidian sect of the Coastal Karnataka, having unique folk dance, unique drum beatings which is very magical charming, powerful and belief is that drumming (kaddayi) sounds can eradicate any evil force. The drum beating itself drive away the bad spirits and safeguard the forest ecology and brings up bumper crops. Koraga's drums and music have empowered with special shamanic healing power and very powerful than the hymns of greater tradition. Koraga tribal have their own language. (According to Unesco's Atlas of World's one of the Languages in Danger, or at risk of extinction is Koraga,. The world body has listed a total of 196 Indian languages as endangered, including eight in South India, of which five are from Karnataka. Unesco treats all these languages as "vulnerable".) The Koraga's population is restricted to west coast region, to be more precise it is from Kundapur ( Karnataka) to Kasargod( Kerala) There is a fort at Shankarnarayan in Kundapur which is identified as 'Korara koote' means the fort of the Koraga's. It shows the power of Koraga community in the society in the olden days. It is also believed that they ruled the region with their dynasty.**
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# Koragas and their intangible cultural heritage

- Koragas are eminent in their drum beating. The drum 'kaddayi' used for percussion in the occasional ritual and dance in connection with festivals.
  - A group of 8 to 16 dancers beat the drum and dance to its different rhythms, which are controlled and directed by a leader with wind instrument flute named as 'oonte', another adds cymbals named as 'keisaala' moving at different directions, small drum is used and known as 'chende' or 'karande'. Tribal's use raw hide to cover the drums both sides is considered very auspicious and they are very sceptical in using natural drums.
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- **Beats and rhythms are fascinating to the viewer what with effect of sounds and simple choreography built by the tribal genius. The drummers foot moves in clock- wise and front and back, there is no fixed choreography to these performers and some time drum music itself become powerful than dance. The dance part becomes less because the drums are heavy and also hung on the shoulder, frequently use slow beat and fast rhythms, alternate and group weaves varied patterns.**
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- **The costumes are simple. Sometime use cap is made of areca folder known as 'muttale' and decking with colorful beads around the shoulder and neck, upper part of the body is left bare and sometime use simple cloth and the lower one has a traditional 'dhooti'.**
  - **Koragas are divided into a number of exogamous clans or sects. The clan is known as *bali*. There are 17 *balis* found among Koragas. The Korags are basically agriculturists and eke out their livelihood depending on the forest produce such as bamboo, cane, creepers for basketry. Koragas sing songs and perform folkdances, rituals and magics to appease their deity for bountiful crops and eradicate epidemics.**



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- **Koragas are deft in making baskets using creepers, canes and bamboos by splitting and weaving them artistically. Basketry is the main source of income of Koraga tribal community as the scavenger and orderly profession have already been prohibited by the Govt. The skill of making baskets are transferred from one generation to the other. Even the babies used to weave baskets. Baskets are used to keep agricultural products. Now a days those baskets have come to the drawing rooms of middle class and upper middle class people of he society.**

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# **Koragas and their indigenous knowledge**

- **Being the earliest inhabitants they have acquired the indigenous knowledge related to environment, forest, agriculture, animal husbandry, medical etc It can be summed up as follows-**
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# 1. Environmental knowledge

- Knowledge on the natural environment
  - (Ex: Plants , animals and eco-systems)
  - 1.2 Knowledge on Anthropogenic mythology.
  - 1.3 Knowledge on the social and political environment. (neighbouring groups, structures of the dominant groups, development projects)
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## 2. Agricultural knowledge

- **2.1** Knowledge on cultivation, seeds, manure, insecticides, harvesting and warehousing the grains.
- **3. Medical knowledge**
- **3.1** Diagnosis and curative system
- **3.2** preparation of medicines.
- **4. Indigenous technical knowledge (ITK)**
- **4.1** Construction of huts, cattle sheds, agricultural implements, hunting implements etc
- **5 Organization and management including knowledge on dispute management (Legal knowledge)**
- **5.1** Settling the disputes between the persons in the tribe .
- **5.2** settling the dispute between the person inside the tribe and outside the outside.



- **6 Knowledge of personal relationships with in the society**
- **Indigenous knowledge is also an intangible cultural heritage and an important natural resource that can facilitate the development process in cost-effective, participatory and sustainable way. The basic component of any country's knowledge system is its indigenous knowledge. It encompasses the skills, experiences and insights of people, applied to improve their livelihood. Since indigenous knowledge is essential to development, it is often suggested that it must be gathered and documented in a coherent and systematic fashion (Brokenshaw, 1980; Warren, 1995).**



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