

Ethnic Identity and Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Study of the Koraga Community of South India

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SUMMARY

The Koraga community lives in south India and is part of the tribal tradition, the original inhabitants. The tribal population in India in the 1991 census was 67 million, almost equal to the population of Britain. India has the second largest tribal population in the world, second to Africa.

Tribes in India are referred to as “Scheduled Tribes.” The scheduled tribes make up the second largest group of backward classes in India that are known as un-privileged.

There are various descriptions of a tribe. One is that a tribe is a collection of families with a common name, members occupy the same territory, speak the same language and observe the same taboos regarding marriage, profession or occupation and have developed a system of reciprocity and mutuality of obligation.

The Koraga community of Karnataka and Kerala states is considered to be one of the most primitive communities in India. The origins of their name are unclear, though the word may be a corruption of the word Kuruvar, hill man.

The Koragas have a unique folk dance and drum beating musical style which is magical and powerful, with the belief it can drive away evil forces.

The Koragas are eminent in their drum beating. A group of eight to 16 dancers beat the drum and dance to different rhythms which are controlled by a leader with a wind instrument, while others play cymbals and move in different directions.

According to UNESCO, the Koraga language is one of the languages in danger of extinction out of a total of 196 endangered languages in India.

The Koragas are divided into a number of clans or sects. They are agriculturists and eke out a living using forest produce including bamboo, cane and creepers. They are good at making baskets out of creepers, one of their main sources of income. The skill has been passed on from generation to generation.

Being the earliest inhabitants, they have acquired indigenous knowledge related to the environment, forest, agriculture, animal husbandry and medicinal plants.

Indigenous knowledge is an intangible cultural heritage and an important natural resource. It can help facilitate development that is cost effective, participatory and sustainable. Indigenous knowledge should be collected and documented in systematic way.

It is important to keep in mind that a lot is lost when you lose a language.

DISCUSSION

Question: What next for the Koragas in India? Assimilation? What about their human rights if they are assimilated?

Answer: I don't think we can discuss this. This is an identity issue.