



Folk Traditions And Cultural Identity Among The Kuruba Community In Karnataka: An Empirical Analysis

Dr. Mahesh B

Guest Faculty, Department of Kannada
Government First Grade College, Vijayanagara

Paper Received:

28th July, 2022

Paper Accepted:

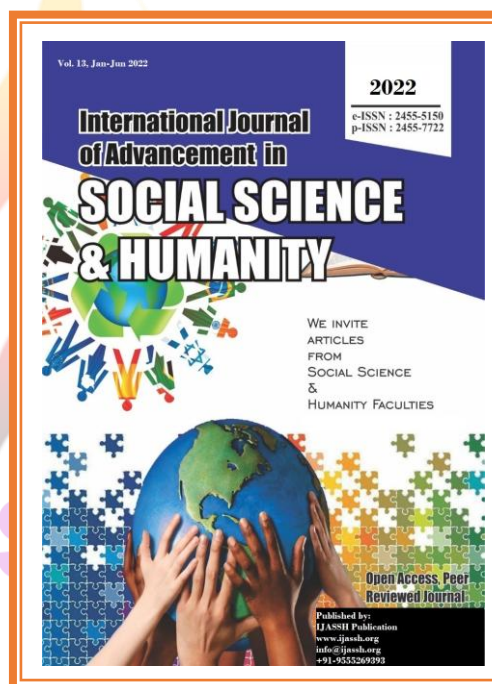
09th October, 2022

Paper Received After Correction:

29th November, 2022

Paper Published:

15th December, 2022



How to cite the article: Mahesh B, Folk Traditions And Cultural Identity Among The Kuruba Community In Karnataka: An Empirical Analysis, IJASSH, July-December 2022
Vol 14; 230-237

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the folk traditions and cultural identity of the Kuruba community in Karnataka, highlighting their historical roots, social practices, and enduring cultural heritage. They are one of Karnataka's largest caste groups, deriving their identity from traditional shepherding and animal husbandry, and maintaining a rich folk culture characterized by distinctive art forms such as the Dollu Kunita dance, as well as a profound connection to nature and indigenous traditions. The Kuruba community is predominantly concentrated in the eastern regions of Karnataka, a landscape characterized by plateaus interspersed with hills, rivers, and tanks. The soil in this area is primarily red soil and red sandy loam, which is generally unsuitable for intensive agriculture. The terrain of low hills and plains, often rocky and covered with scrub vegetation, is well-suited for pastoral activities. Traditionally, the Kurubas practiced transhumance pastoralism, moving their large flocks of sheep seasonally between pastures to sustain their livelihoods. In addition to pastoralism, the community historically engaged in weaving kamblis (woolen blankets) as a supplementary occupation, although this practice largely declined by the 20th century.

This study was majorly two objectives are: 1) to investigate the historical origins and folk traditions of the Kuruba community in Karnataka and 2) to examine the cultural identity practices of the Kuruba community in the state. As per the findings of this study, the folk traditions of the Kuruba community in Karnataka play a pivotal role in shaping and sustaining cultural identity. The research revealed that practices such as ritual performances, oral narratives, folk songs, and festivals are not merely ceremonial activities but serve as symbols of collective memory, social cohesion, and moral values. The study demonstrates that Kuruba folk traditions are resilient, adaptive, and essential for sustaining cultural identity, underscoring the need for their documentation and preservation.

Keywords: *History; Kuruba Community; Folk Traditions; Cultural Identities; Ritual Practices; Socio-Cultural; Kannada Literature.*

Introduction

India is home to a rich diversity of communities, each with its own unique cultural practices, folk traditions, and social structures. Among these, the Kuruba community of Karnataka stands out for its longstanding association with pastoralism, agriculture, and vibrant folk culture. Traditionally, shepherds and cattle rearers, the Kurubas have inhabited the Deccan plateau for centuries, leaving a distinct imprint on the region's cultural, religious, and social landscape. Their traditions—ranging from ritual performances, folk songs, oral narratives, and festivals to

worship of local deities—serve not only as expressions of creativity but also as vital markers of collective identity and social cohesion.

The Kuruba community's folk traditions are particularly significant in a modernizing society, where economic changes, urbanization, and exposure to global media are reshaping lifestyles. Ritual performances such as Goravara Kunitha, festivals like Mailara Jaatre, and oral storytelling function as mediums of intergenerational knowledge transfer, linking younger generations to ancestral values, ethical principles, and communal

solidarity. These cultural practices are therefore central to the community's self-understanding and identity formation. Despite the evident richness of Kuruba folk culture, empirical studies examining its role in shaping cultural identity are limited. Most available literature focuses on descriptive ethnography, ritual practices, or historical accounts, with few systematic analyses of how these traditions are perceived, transmitted, and adapted across generations.

Through this study, therefore, seeks to empirically analyze the relationship between folk traditions and cultural identity among the Kuruba community in Karnataka. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines structured surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation, the research aims to document the community's key folk practices, assess their role in identity construction, and examine variations across generations and regions. By doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the resilience, adaptation, and significance of folk culture in contemporary society.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the historical origins and folk traditions of the Kuruba community in Karnataka.
2. To examine the cultural identity practices of the Kuruba community in the state.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative perspectives to understand the Kuruba community's folk traditions and their cultural significance. The research

primarily relies on secondary sources, including official reports from the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC), Ministry of Tribal Affairs, and Census of India (2011), as well as scholarly articles, books on folk culture, vachanas, oral traditions, and relevant digital resources.

History of Kuruba Community in Karnataka

The Kuruba community, the third-largest caste group in Karnataka, is an ancient pastoral community communities in Karnataka, with a long and continuous history rooted in the early stages of human civilization in South India. Known historically as warriors, shepherds, and farmers, they ruled parts of southern India for 325 years, peaking during the Vijayanagara Empire. They are deeply associated with the Halumatha tradition, honoring deities like Beereswara, and are culturally distinct, with figures like Kanakadasa and Sangolli Rayanna.

The term Kuruba is derived from the Kannada word "Kuri," meaning sheep, which reflects the community's traditional occupation of sheep rearing and pastoralism. This occupational identity has been central to the socio-economic and cultural life of the Kurubas for centuries. The origins of the Kuruba community can be traced back to the Neolithic period, when early human societies began domesticating animals and practicing agriculture. Archaeological evidence from Karnataka, including megalithic burial sites, suggests the presence of pastoral groups who depended on cattle and sheep.

Culturally, the Kuruba community is closely associated with the Halumatha tradition, which emphasizes pastoral

values and devotion to local deities such as Beereswara. The community has produced several prominent historical and cultural figures, including Kanakadasa, a renowned saint-poet of the Bhakti movement, and Sangolli Rayanna, a celebrated freedom fighter. These figures exemplify the community's contributions to religious, cultural, and political history. Thus, the Kuruba community represents a significant and enduring component of Karnataka's historical and cultural landscape, marked by pastoral heritage, political participation, and a strong cultural identity.

Results and Discussion

Folk Traditions of the Kuruba Community

Through this study, the Kuruba community in Karnataka possesses a rich tapestry of folk traditions deeply rooted in pastoralism and nature worship. Key elements include the energetic Dollu Kunitha (drum dance) and Goravara Kunitha (devotional dance) for Lord Mailara Linga, alongside unique, nature-inspired rituals, ancestral worship (Baluvu), and traditional honey-gathering practices among the Jenu Kuruba subgroup. Some important aspects of Kuruba folk traditions are:

1) Performing Arts & Dance: The Kuruba community of Karnataka is renowned for its vibrant folk dances, which reflect their cultural identity, religious devotion, and close connection with nature. Dollu Kunitha, one of the most prominent dances, is a dynamic drum dance associated with the Shaivite Kurubas. It is characterized by vigorous movements, synchronized group formations, and powerful rhythmic beats, and is traditionally performed during

social and religious ceremonies. Goravara Kunitha is another significant dance form, performed in devotion to Lord Mailara Linga, a manifestation of Shiva. Performers wear distinct black and red costumes and dance with intense fervor to the rhythmic sound of the Damaru, expressing spiritual dedication and communal unity. In addition, the Jenu Kuruba dance is a tribal folk performance that imitates the movements of bees and the process of honey collection. This dance symbolizes the community's intimate relationship with nature and their traditional ecological knowledge. Collectively, these folk dances serve not only as artistic expressions but also as important markers of the Kuruba community's cultural heritage, spiritual practices, and social cohesion.

2) Rituals & Belief Systems: Baluvu is a sacred, all-night ritual performed by the Kadu Kuruba at a central, consecrated location known as the Ambala. This ritual is conducted to fulfill vows made to ancestral spirits and deities, and it often involves the symbolic sacrifice of a hen to avert misfortune. Ancestor worship holds a central place in the community's belief system, reflecting the conviction that supernatural beings and ancestors act as protectors and guardians of the family and village.

3) Traditional Occupations and Practices: Traditionally, Kuruba community has been engaged in pastoralism, primarily rearing sheep and goats, which has profoundly shaped their social structure and way of life. In addition to pastoral activities, some subgroups are involved in honey collection, particularly the Jenu Kuruba (literally "Honey Kuruba"), who have inherited ancestral

knowledge and practices for harvesting honey from forests. This includes the use of handwoven baskets and specialized techniques passed down through generations, reflecting their deep connection to nature and traditional ecological expertise.

4) Art and Craft: The Kuruba community is traditionally engaged in wool-based crafts, particularly the weaving and processing of wool obtained from Deccani sheep. This artisanal practice involves transforming raw wool into kamblis (woolen blankets), shawls, and other handwoven products, reflecting both their pastoral heritage and skilled craftsmanship. Wool craft not only serves as a source of livelihood but also represents an important aspect of the community's cultural identity and traditional knowledge.

Cultural Identity and Social Practices of the Kuruba Community

This study is a significant empirical analysis of the Kuruba community, Karnataka's third-largest caste group, historically rooted in sheep rearing, pastoralism, and agriculture, and comprising distinct sub-groups such as Halu, Hande, and Kambali Kuruba. Culturally, they are known for the Dollu Kunita dance, a vibrant drum-dance, and worship deities such as Shiva, Venkataramana, and Biredevaru. Their social practices include community-focused pastoral traditions, though many are transitioning to agriculture and labor due to changing markets. The cultural identity and social practices of the Kuruba community play a vital role in preserving their heritage, fostering community

cohesion, and shaping their worldview. Some of the key aspects include:

1) Traditional Livelihoods and Lifestyle:

The Kuruba community, whose name in Kannada means "shepherd," has traditionally been engaged in pastoralism and agriculture, with many practicing sheep and goat rearing. Historically, some groups maintained a semi-nomadic, transhumance lifestyle, moving seasonally with their flocks. Due to the decline of pasturelands and forest restrictions, many have settled into farming or agricultural labour. Sub-groups such as the Jenu Kuruba and Kadu Kuruba have traditionally depended on the forest, engaging in honey collection, gathering food, hunting small animals, and harvesting minor forest products like bamboo for crafts. Their cultural identity is closely linked to the forest ecosystem, which they regard as an integral part of their community. In addition, the Kadu and Betta Kurubas are skilled in weaving baskets, mats, and other household items using bamboo and cane, reflecting their artisanal heritage.

2) Social Structure and Community Life:

The Kuruba community exhibits a well-defined social structure, particularly in comparison to other communities. Forest-dwelling Kurubas typically reside in small, cluster-based settlements known as Hadi or Ambala, with the Ambala serving as a central space for rituals, community gatherings, and judicial matters. The community maintains its own system of self-governance, led by a secular headman (Yajamana) and a ritual leader (Gudda or Shaman), who oversee social, religious, and dispute resolution functions. In terms of family and marriage practices, monogamy is predominant, with a cultural

preference for cross-cousin marriages. Among some tribal sub-groups, marriage by elopement remains a traditional practice, involving comparatively minimal parental intervention, in contrast to orthodox Hindu family norms.

3) Spiritual Beliefs and Rituals: The Kuruba community's spiritual life is deeply integrated into their daily practices and lifestyle. While they are generally identified as Shaivites, worshipping Lord Shiva, they also revere a variety of regional and village deities, including Mailara/Mallanna, Beerappa, and Yellamma. Their religious practices incorporate elements of animism and ancestor worship, reflecting a belief in supernatural forces and the spiritual power of nature and wildlife, such as tigers and snakes. In rituals system, Baluvu is a significant sacred ritual performed at the Ambala to fulfill vows made to deities and ancestors. The ritual typically involves fire ceremonies, spirit possession through a Shaman, and the sacrifice of a hen as an offering to avert misfortune. The Goravas are an order of saints devoted to Mailari Devaru (a regional form of Shiva). Within this religious system, traditional festivals are marked by folk songs and dances that reflect themes of agriculture, marriage, and religious myths, serving both devotional and social functions in the community.

Kuruba Community: A Kannada Literature View

Kannada literature offers valuable insights into the historical, cultural, and social life of the Kuruba community. From early classical texts to modern writings, Kurubas are frequently represented as pastoralists closely linked to nature, land, and livestock, particularly sheep and goats.

Their pastoral lifestyle, folk beliefs, and community cohesion are recurring themes in literary depictions. In medieval Kannada literature, references to shepherd communities resembling the Kurubas appear in vachana literature and folk narratives. The 12th century Vachana movement, led by Basavanna, Akka Mahadevi, and Allama Prabhu, emphasized social equality, dignity of labour, and devotion to God, often portraying pastoral life as spiritually meaningful. The occupational and rural life of the Kurubas thus became a lens through which broader social and religious values were explored.

Folk (Janapada) literature is particularly significant in understanding the Kuruba worldview. Folk songs, ballads, and oral narratives highlight their seasonal migrations, rituals, worship of local deities such as Beerappa and Mailara, and strong kinship bonds. These narratives preserve the community's collective memory and express its cultural identity through stories, music, and dance.

In modern Kannada literature, writers have examined the Kurubas through realistic and socio-political perspectives. Authors like Kuvempu, Girish Karnad, Devanur Mahadeva, and Siddalingaiah depict rural life, caste dynamics, and the challenges faced by marginalized communities, including Kurubas. These works portray the Kurubas not only as pastoralists but also as active participants in Karnataka's social, cultural, and political life. Overall, Kannada literature—both classical and contemporary—provides a rich and nuanced portrayal of the Kuruba community, reflecting their historical continuity, folk traditions, and evolving

cultural identity. Literary sources thus serve as an essential tool for understanding the social and cultural heritage of the Kurubas in Karnataka.

Conclusion

The study of the Kuruba community in Karnataka highlights the central role of folk traditions in shaping cultural identity and social cohesion. Rituals, festivals, oral narratives, and folk performances are more than cultural expressions—they function as vehicles for transmitting values, collective memory, and a sense of belonging across generations. The research shows that while modernization, urbanization, and migration have influenced the ways younger Kurubas engage with their heritage, the core elements of folk culture remain resilient, particularly among elders and ritual specialists. Participation in rituals like Goravara Kunita and festivals such as Mailara Jaatre, as well as the performance of oral narratives, continues to reinforce communal solidarity and cultural pride. Kannada literature—both classical and modern—provides additional evidence of the community's cultural significance, illustrating how folk traditions and oral narratives are integral to Karnataka's literary and social heritage. Overall, the study demonstrates that the Kuruba community's folk traditions are dynamic, adaptive, and essential for sustaining identity, linking past and present while offering a model for understanding how rural and pastoral communities preserve their culture in changing social contexts. The findings underscore the importance of documenting, preserving, and promoting folk culture, not only as an academic endeavor but also as a means of

empowering communities and sustaining Karnataka's rich cultural diversity.

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