

# Preserving Kodava Culture: A Call for Recognition and Action by Poonacha Machaiah a review

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**Abstract:** Kodavas are among the earliest inhabitants of Kodagu they are an indigenous land-owning community of hunters and warriors, with strong ties to the land and a martial tradition.

This paper tries to review the powerful address at UNGA 100 Disruptors Summit at United Nations, Sep.21, 2024 by Poonacha Machaiah on preserving kodava tribal culture.

Culture is defined as ‘a way of life of a people or community’, in this case the Kodava tribe, comprising the many aspects that together make that ‘way of life’ – their dress, language, social structure, ancestral homes, religious practices, customs, festivals, songs and dances. Kodavas have a unique culture and rituals. It is necessary to preserve the community, and several rights in this regard are granted to us by the Indian Constitution it’s a crucial step towards a more sustainable and mentally resilient world.

**Keywords:** Culture, Kodava, Community

## REVIEW

Poonacha Machaiah from Kodagu is a successful entrepreneur and business leader. He is passionate about conscious leadership and wellbeing. He is pursuing his mission of “personal transformation and societal wellbeing” working alongside leading companies and industry thought leaders. He is highly entrepreneurial, an excellent business partner to someone that is looking to enter into new markets. He has over 20 years of global experience as a successful serial entrepreneur and business leader in Fortune 100 companies.

I would like to review his powerful address at UNGA 100 Disruptors Summit at United Nations, Sep.21, 2024 by Poonacha Machaiah on preserving kodava tribal culture, by highlighting very serious points Cauvery River Degradation, Mental Health and Cultural Preservation,

Kodava cultural traditions and practices were transmitted orally from generation to generation. (It was only in 1924 that Nadikerianda Chinnappa compiled Kodava traditions and folksongs in the

Pattole Palame, which was acclaimed by the University of Mysore as the earliest extensive collection of the folklore of a community in an Indian language.) Yet, the Kodava community has retained its unique culture and maintained its identity and its distinctive way of life over many centuries.<sup>1</sup> Kodagu, southern India, lies a treasure trove of cultural wisdom and environmental stewardship that the world cannot afford to lose. The Kodavas, an indigenous community with a rich history stretching back centuries, offer invaluable insights into sustainable living, mental wellness, and harmonious coexistence with nature. As global challenges like climate change and mental health crises loom large, the preservation of Kodava culture is not just a matter of cultural heritage — it’s a crucial step towards a more sustainable and mentally resilient world. This is my heritage and the story of my people he said!

More significantly, the Kodavas’ bonds of affection and reverence for the land they tilled is replaced by a more distant and calculating attitude towards the earth. With a change in mindset and agricultural activity, the older, more pastoral, almost idyllic Coorg as replaced by a district where the land is often viewed as a cash cow and the natural environment sadly degraded in the process. Commercial activity now begins to include the sale of timber on a large scale; the cultivation of silver oak trees in lieu of native species; and finally, the establishment of homestays and resorts as part of tourism encouraged by the Government.

The two main premises made in my study are, first, that literary works, even though they be fiction, can be used as reliable sources of information about the geography of a place, its landforms, other physical features, flora and fauna, and the agricultural activities and cultural practices of the people. The second premise is that when the attitude to the land of the local Kodavas was altered by the vicissitudes of time and history, their agricultural and other occupations changed, and the land with its natural environment consequently changed, too. As it turns out, the modification was adverse. This was only the beginning. The rate of change of the landscape and

natural environment only increased with the passing decades

The Kodavas have long understood the inextricable link between environmental health and human well-being. Their traditional practices, from sustainable agriculture to forest conservation, have allowed them to thrive while maintaining the delicate balance of their ecosystem. The concept of “Devarka Kadu” or “God’s Forest” serves as a built-in geo-fencing for conservation, demonstrating an innate understanding of the importance of biodiversity [1].

Research has shown that indigenous territories often harbor significantly higher biodiversity levels than other areas. The Western Ghats, home to the Kodavas, is recognized as one of the world’s eight “hottest hotspots” of biological diversity [2]. Protecting these regions is crucial not only for preserving flora and fauna but also for safeguarding global climate stability.

#### Deforestation and Biodiversity Loss

The Western Ghats, home to the Kodavas, are one of the world’s biodiversity hotspots and form a crucial watershed. This pristine mountain range faces an array of modern-day challenges. Urbanization, deforestation, habitat fragmentation, and unsustainable agricultural practices pose severe threats to the delicate balance of this ecosystem[8]. The encroachment of human activities endangers not only the wildlife but also the indigenous communities dependent on these ecosystems.

Despite legal prohibitions on logging in shola forests in and outside protected areas, the Western Ghats continue to experience significant tree cover loss. Between 2002 and 2021, Idukki district alone lost nearly 1% of its old-growth forests[8]. This deforestation directly impacts the region’s rich biodiversity, including many endemic and endangered species of amphibians, some of which are new to science[8].

#### Cauvery River Degradation

The Cauvery River, originating in the Western Ghats, is experiencing unprecedented degradation. In 2024, shocking reports revealed that the upper reaches of the Cauvery at Dubare in Kodagu and its tributary, Hemavathi, near Sakleshpur, had dried up[9]. This environmental crisis is attributed to multiple factors, including global warming, El-Niño effects,

deforestation, and invasive species disrupting forest ecosystems[9]. The drying up of this perennial river at its source in the Western Ghats has raised alarm among people and the government, highlighting the urgent need for conservation efforts.

#### Mental Health and Cultural Preservation

The connection between indigenous cultural preservation and mental health is profound. Traditional Kodava practices, from communal rituals to holistic healing methods, have long been powerful tools for maintaining mental and emotional equilibrium. The Kodava concept of ‘okka’ — a system of extended family and community support — provides a robust social safety net that could offer solutions to the modern epidemic of loneliness and isolation [3]. The unique Kodava language, customs, and spiritual practices represent an irreplaceable cultural heritage. UNESCO has warned that up to 90% of the world’s languages may disappear within a century, taking with them vast stores of traditional knowledge. Recognizing the Kodavas and similar groups in the UN’s Indigenous Communities Forum would provide crucial protections and a global platform for sharing their invaluable perspectives. It would also align with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which affirms their right to maintain and strengthen their institutions, cultures, and traditions. Studies have shown that indigenous communities often have lower rates of depression and anxiety when living in accordance with their traditional practices [4]. The Kodava way of life, with its emphasis on community, connection to nature, and holistic well-being, offers valuable lessons in mental health resilience that could benefit global mental health strategies.

The Kodava National Council (CNC), a prominent advocacy group, has been instrumental in championing the rights and recognition of the Kodava people in India. Their comprehensive demands encompass the establishment of a Kodava autonomous region under the Indian Constitution’s 6th schedule, protection of traditional Jamma lands, recognition as an ethno-linguistic tribal minority nationality, inclusion of the Kodava language in the Constitution’s 8th schedule, and constitutional guarantees for Kodava customary laws and heritage. These efforts underscore the multi-faceted approach required to preserve and protect Indigenous cultures like the Kodavas, addressing not only land rights but also linguistic, legal, and administrative autonomy. [12]

## The Urgency of Action

The threat of cultural erosion and environmental degradation facing the Kodavas is not unique. Indigenous communities worldwide are at risk of losing their lands, languages, and traditions. This loss is not just a cultural tragedy — it's a blow to global sustainability efforts and mental health resources.

## CONCLUSION

Our cultures and traditions form our identities, explain beliefs and histories, and contribute to the vibrant varieties of human life. Especially with the recent discovery of the importance of epigenetics, and genetic memory, it is vital to understand and acknowledge “where we came from,” as the struggles, the sorrows, the migrations and the joys of past generations are passed down to us on a cellular level. Many rituals, ceremonies, and cultural traditions stand on this history, celebrating or ameliorating rites of passage within communities.

We each need a community, and we need to claim an identity. Man is not an animal created to live alone, and as Viktor Frankl observed, man's search for meaning frames his (or her) entire life. Preserving cultural traditions is so important in our individual identities: without them, we would become a homogenized society without distinction. Culture and tradition bring flavor to the world, and promote understanding of others. It is important to claim and preserve the knowledge of what makes each of us uniquely a product of our past generations, and the communities that raised us.

The preservation of Kodava culture is not just a local issue—it's a global imperative. By recognizing and protecting indigenous communities like the Kodavas, we safeguard invaluable knowledge that could be crucial in addressing global challenges, including mental health and climate change. As we face an uncertain future, the wisdom of the Kodavas and other indigenous peoples may well hold the key to our collective well-being and survival. The time for action is now. We call upon the United Nations, governments, and global citizens to recognize the Kodavas and similar indigenous communities as vital partners in our quest for a sustainable and mentally healthy world. Their voices must be heard, their lands protected, and their wisdom integrated into our global strategies for the benefit of all humanity.

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