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Kodava Takk - an intangible cultural heritage

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A moribund language - an intangible cultural heritage - documenting the Kodava language having no prevalent script and the various attempts made to develop a script that were made from the 1800's. Kodagu district of Karnataka, in South India host a diverse community of people, occupying the forested mountains for many centuries. The Coorg's have a way of life of their own, as an agricultural community growing rice and now coffee as their main crop. The Kodavas have no substantial written literature. Conservation and transmission of customs and traditions has been passed down through oral tradition. Songs were sung during annual village festival, harvest festival, weddings and funerals and for heroes and deities These folk songs transmitted across several generations are called the Palame or Patt. Numerous efforts were made to develop a script for the Kodava language. Around 7 scripts were developed over a period between 1889 to 2020.

Key words: Kodava, Inscriptions, Traditional languages, Ethnography, Conversational AI

Kodava Takk (*takkë*) is a tongue rather than a written language, spoken by the people of an ethnic group primarily found in the Kodagu district of Karnataka, in South India. In 1834 when Kodagu became a province of British India, it was called Coorg, and the language became known as Coorgi. UNESCO has listed it as one of the 'definitely endangered' languages of the world on the basis of its diminished use as a dialect. Incorrectly identified as being a language of the former Madras province and since written in the Kannada script, it is thought of as a Kannada dialect, has now been recognized as a separate Indian language.

This research paper is written in chronological order, with focus to effectively trace the history of the Kodava community and document the attempts made by several individuals to develop a script for the language. This paper represents the first comprehensive attempt to document and analyze various scripts that were developed, from its origins, providing a foundational exploration of its development, its structure, and usage. In this paper the writer has gathered information to gain better understanding of the background and stakeholders relevant to Kodagu. This paper will present evidence based on the timeline of records, starting with the earliest relevant information and developments through time to the most recent advances and future scope.

The language had no noteworthy printed literature until the end of the 19th century. Records on palm leaves and metal plates that were written by astrologers in the Kodava takk using the Malayalam script, kept in family temples were destroyed during the Mysore Sultanate invasions. Traditions, customs, stories, proverbs, old sayings, riddles, beliefs folklores, ballads, metaphors, proverbs, local sayings and superstitions were all orally communicated from one generation to another through folk songs.

Kodava people began to adopt the Kannada script around the 16th century, influenced by the then rulers, and later by the British imposing Kannada as medium of communication and education. The Kodava language has a number of vowel sounds exclusive to itself. There are discrete changes in pronunciation and tongue while using the Kannada script with vocabulary and linguistic nuance being diminished.

During the 100 years of British Rule, several strategies were devised to effectively regulate the sub-continent. For this, early British administrators & scholars who were called Orientalists, like Warren Hastings glorified India's ancient past. They believed that being empathetic to Indian languages, literature and culture would make it simpler for them to rule the country. With their efforts some prominent establishments were formed, like the Asiatic Society and Fort William College, which became the epicenter for studies on Indian culture, languages and literature.

In 1867 Captain Robert Cole published a 136-page book 'An Elementary Grammar of the Coorg Language'. This was the first documented book on an indigenous language containing detailed knowledge about local biosphere, flora and fauna of Coorg. Cole, while being posted there mentions his first encounter with the Coorg people, whose primary language was a distinct dialect, setting it apart from the official Canarese. Interested to comprehend this unique dialect, Cole discovered it to be a complex spoken tongue, offering daunting challenges in pronunciation. Nonetheless, he continued with his

of Kodava folksongs and traditions, compiled in the early 1900s, has become the chief text on Kodava customs and traditions.

B. Lewis. Rice, British archaeologist, historian and educationist of the then Mysore state, was the first person to transcribe, transliterate, translate, publish and comment on the thousands of stone inscriptions from 300 BC to the 19th century found in Karnataka. They are in Sanskrit, Kannada and Tamil. Lewis created a new kind of study which he called epigraphy; he and his team of local scholars published 9000 of these inscriptions called the Epigraphy Carnatic books published in 1886. Lewis used to copy the inscriptions by spreading ink on to the stone and then pressed onto soft paper. These imprints were then translated with the assistance of local experts, namely Narasimhachar and Krishna. Narasimhachar has cited that the 14th century inscriptions’ “characters are a jumble of Grantha, Malayalam and Tamil.”

In Rice’s Epigraphy Carnatic book series, the Coorg Inscriptions volume (1914), contain transcriptions of 114 stone inscriptions, providing a priceless record of Kodagu’s history. There is mention of two peculiar 14th century inscriptions found in two prominent temples of Kodagu. One of the found inscriptions, called The Bhagamandala inscription is signed as Pakandala Ayari elattu, which translates to “the writing of the Bhagandalaya Achari” Ayari” may indicate that the person who wrote the inscription was a member of the Kodava speaking smithing community.

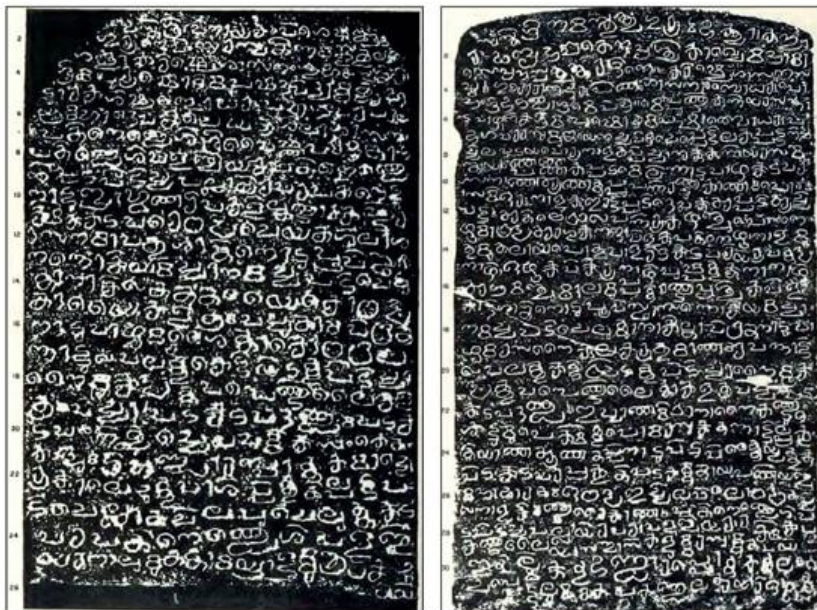


Figure.2 Inscriptions found in Palurappa & Bhubaneshwar temple

The characters appear to be mixed script dating back to the 11th century. The alphabets used suggest a transitional script between Grantha and Tulu-Tigalari. In some sections the letterings are undoubtedly Tamil, but other portions are in a language that is neither Malayalam nor Tulu but is related to them.

In 1971 Dr. IM Muthanna, writer and translator, developed a script, and as of 2022, Karnataka Kodava Sahitya Academy, a government body for the development of Kodava language, accepted the script developed by Dr Muthanna as the official script of the Kodava language. Muthanna stressed on the importance of developing a script and expressed that “A language without an alphabet is like a family without a name, and taking the alphabet from another language is as good as adopting the name of your next-door neighbor”. The Kodava Sahitya Academy recommended Muthanna script to the Central Institute of Indian Languages to be made official.

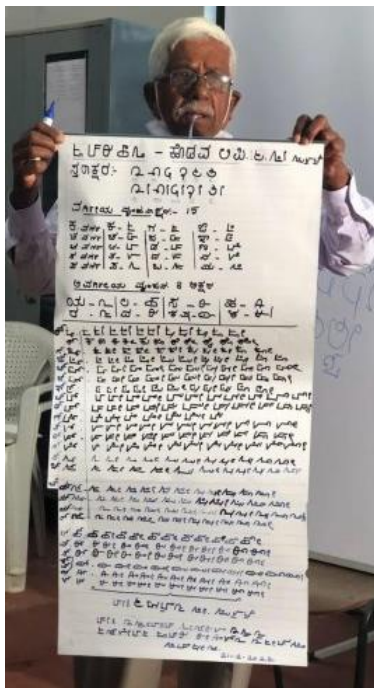


Figure.3 The Muthanna Script being taught by the President of the Kodava Sahitya Academy

Appaneravand Kiran Subbaiah, a sculptor in Mysuru, invented a new script in 1980. In 1983, he introduced a variant of the Kannada script to accommodate the Kodava language.

Ponjanda S Appaiah: A professor who authored the Kodava-English Dictionary, used the Roman script with his own transliteration system in 2003. He also wrote several other works focusing on the history and customs of the Kodavas.

In April 2005 the Coorgi-Cox Alphabet, was devised by an American born multi-linguist, Gregg M. Cox. How Dr. Cox formulated the alphabets is not known. He speaks 64 languages and has found a mention in the Guinness Book of Records. His script also digitized, uses a combination of 26 consonant letters, eight vowel letters and a diphthong marker. He created each letter for a single sound and having no capital letters. Cox made efforts to bring out photographs, compact discs and even introducing a contest to popularize the script. While it is imperative to mention, all information regarding Cox, is written by Cox himself.

| The Coorgi-Cox alphabet | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|----|----|---|----|---|----|----------------|
| A | í | Dh | ᳚ | M | ᳛ | V | ᳜ |
| E | ĩ | F | ᳝ | N | ᳞ | W | ᳟ |
| I | ı̇ | G | ᳠ | P | ᳡ | Y | ᳢ |
| O | ı̇ | Gh | ᳣ | R | ᳤ | Z | ᳥ |
| U | ũ | H | ᳦ | Rh | ᳧ | ae | ᳨ |
| B | ᳚ | J | ᳩ | S | ᳪ | ai | ᳫ |
| Bh | ᳛ | K | ᳬ | Sh | ᳭ | oi | ᳮ |
| Ch | ᳜ | Kh | ᳯ | T | ᳱ | | |
| D | ᳝ | L | ᳲ | Th | ᳳ | ¢ | (double vowel) |

Figure.4 The Alphabets developed by Gregg Cox.

Charles Henry Kumar, a teacher from Mandya also developed a script for Kodava language in 2008.

In January 2022, M N Kushalappa, Engineer and Researcher, attempted to separate the characters in the inscription found by B L Rice, and group them into an alphabet. The alphabets are halfway between a transitional ‘Grantha’ script and the ‘Tulu-Tigalari’ script. It is related to the 14th century Tamil letters. He chose to call his script ‘Thirke’, after the Kodava word for a temple.

Boverianda C Uthaiiah and Thangamma have compiled a comprehensive Kodava-Kannada-English dictionary called Kodava Arivole.

Boverianda Nanjamma and Chinnappa translators and scholars of Kodava studies, had said that in addition to the five rounded Kannada vowels (with both long and short forms), the Kodava language has four unrounded vowels in their short and long forms and a nasal

sound which accompanies some of the consonants. They translated the Pattole Palame into English, in this they have used five diacritical marks (symbols added above letters to indicate accent), tone and stress in their works to accommodate these extra sounds.

Kodava Takk is spoken by 0.5 million speakers across 18 SC, OBC, ST communities. Schools and community programs can teach this endangered language, ensuring they are passed down. As per UNESCO's finding, we could lose half of our linguistic diversity in the coming decades. Besides globalization and urban development our education structures, mass media and technology are all provided in dominant languages only, leading to degradation of lesser spoken languages.

In the early 20th century, research in educational psychology led to the development of Audio-lingual methods of learning. Believing language use was an issue of stimulus and response, teaching methods emphasized repetition and dialogue memorization. Since the 1970s, language is further recognized as a social phenomenon that inherently entails expressing, interpreting, and negotiating meaning. To foster such competence, the current approach of Communicative Language Teaching emphasizes having learners do meaningful activities involving the exchange of old and new material.

If the Kodava language is made official in Coorg District along with Kannada, it will not pose a threat to any community or language but will help the language to flourish. Bilingual education, where children learn in both their native language and a dominant language, is particularly effective. For this to thrive, the local community plays a crucial role in conserving their imperceptible cultural heritage. Local initiatives, such as language classes, cultural events during festivals and storytelling sessions, can help keep this language alive. It is also important for community members to take pride in their language and actively use it in daily life.

Efforts are being made by individuals and small groups that are creating significant impact. Talk Pariyana (Let's Talk) is a story narration channel on YouTube, where videos are made with people from all over the world reciting stories, folklore and traditions in the Kodava language and in English to reach a larger audience base. The writer of this paper has also made a contribution to this channel documenting an ancient village festival of her birth village. She also actively runs a social media account picture-documenting Kodava festivals and traditional food.

The Kodava Samskritika Adhyayana Peetha at Mangalore University works to preserve and promote the Kodava language. Since 2021, the Chair has been offering courses in the Kodava language, from diploma level up to Master's.

A few individuals have started websites like www.kodavaclan.com and social media accounts to popularize the now official written script, but on close scrutiny, they have very little followers or interested individuals. A simple system of transliteration based on the ISO_15919, an international standard on the romanization of many Brahmic scripts is the technique for transliteration for Kodava takk on digital media.

Technology can be a powerful tool for language preservation. Apps, websites, and social media platforms can help teach and promote this endangered language. Leveraging on mobile devices for on-the-go language learning through apps, games, and interactive exercises, can be aimed at the younger generation. Personalized Language Learning (PLL) an AI algorithm that adapt to individual learning styles and needs, provides customized language practice and feedback. AI-powered virtual agents that can converse with users in natural language, facilitating practice and feedback. Natural Language Processing (NLP), which allows computers to understand and process human language, enables applications like conversational AI, language translation, and personalized language learning tools. Duolingo now offers courses in several endangered languages, making it easier for people to learn and practice them. In the future, the author aims to collaborate with machine learning engineers and/or AI application developers to develop a software or mobile application designed to preserve and revitalize this endangered language, ensuring its accessibility and use in the digital age.

Losing our languages means losing important scientific knowledge as well. While documenting this language the author felt, even the mere collection and documentation itself was very urgent and a sacred service to her community. Also, the overall feeling of the members of this community was to have the right to speak its own language and preserve its cultural identity. Promoting our linguistic diversity helps ensure that all voices are heard and respected.

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