

## **Myths and Motives: Kodagu and the Story of the Kaveri Purana**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how specific myths are manipulated as 'histories' in order to assert supremacy, establish a hierarchy, and exercise power and control over people and resources. With specific references to the district of Kodagu in Karnataka, and the lesser known fact that Kodagu has recently raised a demand for a separate statehood, this paper takes a critical approach to the Kaveri Purana in particular, which is upheld as an undisputable theory of origin of the Kodavas. The paper examines the concept of 'myth-making', wherein the myth is repeatedly employed in the everyday life of the people of Kodagu to highlight assumptions of 'greatness' and 'uniqueness' that are attributed to their 'history', through a constant reiteration of the 'Kshatriya' motif. Through an analysis of the dramatized version of the myth presented by Kodagu's first poet and playwright, Haradas Appacha (1866-1944) and through specific examples of the manifestation of the Kaveri Purana in Kodagu's social and cultural life, this paper aims to interrogate how myths are manipulated in order to assert an authentic legitimacy by a concerted obliteration of the fine, yet definite line between myth and history.

This paper argues that myths usually have an underlying motive of aspiration to power and also validations of political identity. The Kaveri myth has entered the public domain vis-à-vis statues of Kaveri as well as of Haradas Appacha. Interestingly, voices of resistance against this 'grand Kodava narrative' are raised by several other *moolanivasis* or original inhabitants of Kodagu, who have highlighted a supremacist tendency on the part of the Kodavas. Political groups in Kodagu constantly employ references to Kaveri which help provide the cultural dimensions to the political movement of separate statehood, but it remains to be seen how far the cultural enactment of the myth assures the success of the separatist movement.

*Key words* : History, identity, Kodagu, legitimacy, masquerade, myth-manipulation, statehood

### INTRODUCTION

Myths and folklore have enriched and enhanced the meaning of life for mankind around the world. While the two words may be sometimes used interchangeably, they continue to be evoked time and again, either as a reminder of the days gone by, or as a means to establish legitimacy of origins, customs and practices of a community. Thapar (2000:754) says that myths may be differentiated from folk tales by their focus on the 'grand events' of the past-the creation of the world, the origin of man and of the gods, the justification of kingship- whereas the folk tale is concerned with more restricted social preoccupations generally not involving any grand narrative.

Myths, therefore, are virtual depictions of the cultural landscape of a particular period, capturing the feelings, thoughts and beliefs of the people in that period. The grand scale and scope of the myth, however, indicates an

inherent power of the myth to be transported over generations cutting across time periods, in its original form, regardless of the changing cultural and social environment of the myth-consumers. The myth continues to exist with a 'sacredness' that was intended in its creation, being practiced even in modern cultural landscapes, which has evolved from the moment of myth-creation. These qualities of myths such as its obscurity, unverifiability, and sacredness render it a powerful tool for manipulation by its creators and users, sometimes helping it manifest itself as *history*, as shall be examined in the later sections.

My academic interest in the area of Kodagu stems from a strong personal connection with the land. My grandfather came to Kodagu from Malabar in the year 1934, and later on established himself as a coffee planter in Kodagu. As a Malayali, born in Kodagu, I was raised with both Malabar and Kodagu traditions.

During the research I undertook for my M.Phil dissertation on the topic, *Haradas Appacha Kavi: Birth and Ambivalences of Modern Kodava Theatre* (2011), I encountered several dimensions of the multi-layered culture of Kodagu that went beyond the referential context of the play texts. It emerged that a process of cultural revival and articulation, centering around a Kodava-land, owned and governed exclusively by Kodavas was revealing itself.

Vijay Thambanda Poonacha's (2004) book, *Conflicting Identities in Karnataka: State and Anti-separate State Movements in Coorg* is the most reliable work on the subject, providing a comprehensive, analytical and chronological history of separate statehood movements in Kodagu. Poonacha records that 'there was no serious debate on the statehood issue until the spread of the 'outsider syndrome' spearheaded by an organization called *Kodagu Moolanivasigala Samrakshana Samithi* (Kodagu Original Inhabitants Protection Committee) in 1982. There were also several other short-lived 'separatist' organizations that fought against the 'discriminatory policies' of the Karnataka Government between 1985 and 1991 such as *Yuvajanasabha*, *Janajagrithi Samithi*, *Navanirman Samithi* and *Kodagu Ekikarana Ranga / KER* (Kodagu Unification Front) and Liberation Warriors of Kodagu (LIWAK). Presently, LIWAK has transformed itself into Codava National Council (CNC) which is the foremost organization in Kodagu spearheading the separatist movement. CNC employs cultural tropes such as public celebrations of Kodava festivals and revival of long forgotten traditions and customs in the articulation of the demand for a separate statehood. Poonacha notes that the CNC aimed at constructing a history to mobilize the Kodava people in the name of 'culture' and 'identity' and took an oath to 'separate Coorg, the "sacred land of Kaveri," from the "gutter" of Karnataka' (Poonacha 2004: 21).

The political articulation of the statehood movement compelled me to engage with its cultural dimensions, particularly in the manifestations of the Kaveri myth in Kodava social and cultural life, which essentially seems to provide a social charter in validating a 'legitimization' of Kodava identity. My

methodology has involved a close reading of the Kaveri myth particularly in Haradas Appacha's plays, owing to my familiarity with the language and cultural associations. It is precisely my awareness of these cultural dimensions that enables me to read the myth in a specific and strategic way.

The objective of this paper is to examine the use of myths as a means to establish a 'glorious history', by interrogating how myths can be manipulated to provide an authenticity and legitimacy to a people or a community towards achieving a specific set of political goals. Some of the research questions addressed in this paper are: How does the notion of culture feed the mobilization and consolidation of a homogeneous political identity? How then, does the myth of Kaveri, for instance, translate into 'history' and does an application of that history to a community of people succeed in politicizing the identity formed in the process?

For specific purposes and by specific peoples, myths can be manipulated in order to masquerade as the 'history' of a people. Through examples from the small district of Kodagu/ Coorg in Karnataka, this paper argues how these 'histories' are 'manufactured' in order to assert supremacy, establish a hierarchy, and exercise power and control over people and resources. With specific references to the Kaveri Purana in particular, this paper examines the concept of 'myth-making' wherein the myth is repeatedly employed in the social and cultural life of the Kodavas (the people of Kodagu) to highlight assumptions of 'greatness' and 'uniqueness' that are attributed to their 'history'. Focusing on the use of myths as a means to establish a 'glorious history', this paper aims to interrogate how myths are manipulated in order to assert an authentic, undisputable legitimacy by a concerted obliteration of the fine, yet definite line between myth and history. In the following sections, the paper will first give a brief summary of the political upheavals in the district of Kodagu; the second part will delve into the myth of the Kaveri Purana and its linkages to the origin theory of the Kodavas; the third part will discuss the manipulation of the Kaveri Purana to 'masquerade' as the history of the Kodavas and the last section will discuss the various manifestations of the Kaveri Purana in present day Kodagu and will go on to understand how myths become a potent tool for accessing and retaining power and resources.

#### KAVERI PURANA AND THE HISTORY OF KODAGU

Kodagu is a small district in the state of Karnataka. The people of Kodagu are known as Kodavas, and the language they speak is known as Kodavattakk. Apart from the Kodavas, there are several other communities such as the Kudiyas, Koyavas and Airis who also speak Kodavattakk and have belonged to the land of Kodagu since ancient times.

The district of Kodagu in Karnataka has witnessed several complicated political transitions throughout history. From the earliest known Nayakas, to the Lingayat kings of Haleri, from periodic attacks by Tipu Sultan to the

subsequent annexation by the British in 1834, the fabric of Kodagu's social and cultural life has seen many interventions. After the States Reorganization Act of 1956, there have been sporadic calls for establishing Kodagu as a separate state/ union territory.<sup>1</sup> The 'movement' is currently being spearheaded by the Kodava National Council (CNC) an organization that has been working towards this goal for the past twenty five years. The calls for separation from the state of Karnataka have been buttressed by an assertion of a 'uniqueness' of the Kodavas, in terms of their origins, culture and mannerisms, as one that is not seen in the rest of Karnataka or even India. This paper examines the use of the Kaveri Purana as an origin myth, in highlighting this 'uniqueness' that is upheld and performed repeatedly as a tool for accelerating the statehood movement.

#### THE KAVERI PURANA

Kodagu is a treasure-trove of myths and folklore. One of the most popular myths is connected with River Kaveri originating at Talacauvery in Kodagu. The Kaveri myth from the Skanda Purana is regarded by the Kodavas as the one undisputed story of Kodava origins that is upheld owing to its 'sanctitude' and also to its linkages to a Kshatriya lineage. The Kaveri Purana is retraced here in order to examine the reasons for its popularity as the origin myth of Kodavas, a concept which gets routinely performed from time to time in several ways. I argue that these performances that reiterate the Kaveri myth is a carefully processed product, especially designed to project a unique and legitimate Kshatriya identity for the Kodavas.

The Kaveri Purana forms chapters 11-14 of the Skanda Purana. In the narrative, Goddess Parvati assigns Lopamudre, an incarnation of Parvati to flow as a river and bring prosperity to the world. Lopamudre is born as the adopted daughter of Lord Brahma. Meanwhile, a sage named Kavera, deep in penance, prays to Lord Brahma to grant him a child. Pleased with his penance, Brahma offers him Lopamudre. Adopted by sage Kavera, she is henceforth known as Kaveri. Kaveri is pious and dutiful and is very much devoted to her father, assisting him in all his duties. One day, sage Agastya, passing by, sees Kaveri and is struck by her divine beauty and desires to marry her. Kaveri is hesitant because she knows that once she marries the sage, her purpose in life to bring prosperity to her people, would be lost forever. She agrees to marry him on the condition that Agastya should never leave her alone or covet another woman. They are thus married and Agastya keeps her safe in his sacred urn. One day, at Talacauvery (in Kodagu), Agastya goes to pay respects to River Kanake, asking his disciples to keep watch over Kaveri. Seizing this opportunity, Kaveri escapes from the sacred urn, and flows away as a river from Talacauvery. When the disciples try to stop her, she flows underground and reappears again at the foothills of Bhagamandala.

This is the story of the origin of River Kaveri, according to Skanda Purana. It must be noted that until this point, the story from Skanda Purana has nothing

to do with Kodagu or with the Kodavas, except for the point of geographical interest that Talacauvery is located in Kodagu. The Kaveri Purana is also known as the Kaveri *mahatmya*, which literally means the ‘greatness of Kaveri’. Thus *Kaveri mahatmya* is already an *upa*-Purana to the *Skanda* Purana. In these *upa*-Puranas too, there are several further interpolations where, in each case, the intent is to provide sanctity and credibility to the present by drawing upon the past. Thapar (2014) says that an identity is not created accidentally nor is it altogether innocent of intention thus indicating that all myths are born out of motive.<sup>2</sup> Let us see how the Kaveri Purana is embellished by specific ‘information’ or ‘sub-texts’ that translate into ‘motives’ to elevate the social status and assert the uniqueness of the Kodava identity.

#### SUB-TEXTS IN THE KAVERI PURANA

A related myth concerns the narrative of Kanake and Sujyoti, two rivers who, along with Kaveri, form the holy trinity of rivers. This is a reflection of the well-known tale of River Saraswati which is said to have been lost in the desert sands, but joins the Ganga and Yamuna, unseen, at their confluence in Prayag. River Sujyoti, is depicted as a boon granted to a devout Brahmin sage named Suyajna by Lord Vishnu. Lord Indra, taken in by her beauty, requests her hand in marriage. Sujyoti agrees hesitantly. She reveals to River Kanake that she wished to flow as a river and bring prosperity to the land. Accordingly, the two women set off as streams. Angered by this defiance, Indra curses Sujyoti that her waters shall disappear. Sujyoti, thus dry and barren, pleads with Indra who grants some consolation that when the river Kaveri comes flowing, she and Kanake may join her, and in her company, unite with the great sea.<sup>3</sup>

Another parallel story is that Goddess Parvati appears in the dream of the Kshatriya King Chandravarma of Matsyadesha and grants him a boon that he will rule the bountiful forested land justly and that he will have eleven sons who will populate the country. She further assures him that at an appropriate time, she will incarnate as River Kaveri and will redeem him of all his sins from his previous birth and bring peace and prosperity to the land. Parvati thus grants him a Sudra wife who bears him eleven sons. They were known as *Ugras*, born out of the union of a Kshatriya man and a Sudra woman. However, the children are raised as Kshatriyas because of the blessings of Parvati and their land was called Matsyadesha. These people dug up the barren land with their own hands like a boar (*kroda*), and hence the land came to be known as Krodadesha also. In due time, Kaveri flows as a river and reaches Valampuri (now, Balamuri), where the new king Devakanta<sup>4</sup> and his subjects stand in obeisance. Kaveri blesses the king and his subjects and continues her onward journey thus fulfilling her vow to bring prosperity to the country. It is said that the force of the mighty river was so strong that the women’s sari pleats were pushed to the back. This is why Kodava women wear their saris till date, with the pleats to the back.<sup>5</sup>

Examining these two subtexts, one could say that the first sub-text is a strategic attempt to bring the River Kaveri at par with the Ganges by invoking the canonical idea of the Triveni Sangam at Prayag in Northern India. Sujyoti takes the role of River Saraswati, the unseen river that is said to be the third river in the holy Triveni Sangam. The second subtext relates to the origin of the Kodava people. Chandravarma is established as a Kshatriya King, with an allegiance to Goddess Parvati. Children born to his Sudra wife are raised as Kshatriyas. The Kaveri myth has been subtly appropriated to provide a glorious, Kshatriya lineage to the Kodavas.

A significant point of interest is that Kodagu is also referred to as Krodadesha. A myth surrounding Krodadesha is that Lord Vishnu, who had taken the avatar of Varaha, had turned into a fierce Kroda (wild boar) causing havoc and destruction to the land of Kodagu. So the people prayed to Lord Shiva, who promised to subdue the fearsome boar. Lord Shiva takes the form of a hunter and kills the wild boar, and thus the land came to be known as Krodadesha.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, the references to a) two of Lord Vishnu's avatars (*Matsya* and *Varaha*) in the nomenclature of Kodagu, b) Lopamudre / Kaveri, as Brahma's daughter, and c) Parvati, the consort of Shiva as the deity the Kodavas, contribute towards creating a glorious past through constant references to the holy trinity of the Hindu pantheon. These repeated allusions to the canonical Puranas in the Kaveri myth and its association with the Kodavas, provide a 'sanctified', 'legitimate' and more importantly, 'Kshatriya' ancestry to the Kodavas by creating a plausible 'history' to legitimize the Kodava lineage.

#### MYTH-MANIPULATION - APPACHA KAVI AND THE KAVERI PURANA

It will be interesting to look at the dramatized version of the Kaveri myth to better understand the 'motives' of the myth. I argue that it was Haradas Appacha Kavi (1868-1944), known as the first playwright of Kodagu, who eternalized the Kaveri Purana through his seminal work *Kaveri Nataka* (1918) by using the Kannada script to write the Kodavattakk language.

Indeed, he has taken special care to glorify River Kaveri in almost all of his plays namely *Yayati Rajanda Nataka* (1906), *Subramanya Nataka* (1908) and *Savitri Nataka* (1908). In all these plays, Appacha describes the significance of River Kaveri through several examples as well as through songs in praise of the river. *Kaveri Nataka*, as depicted by the name, has an entirely different agenda. Kaveri Purana from the Skanda Purana, is the core plot of the *Kaveri Nataka*. However, Appacha has modified/ manipulated the plot to suit the Kodava ethos in more ways than one. Apart from glorifying the land and the people, Appacha's main aim with the *Kaveri Nataka* was to enlighten the Kodavas of their glorious past and to remind them of their sacred 'history'. In the introduction to the *Kaveri Nataka*, Appacha writes:

I highly doubt if our Kodava people know anything about Shri Kaveramma, Who is she? Where was she born? Why was she born? Why did she take the form of a river? How did this land become our *janma-bhoomi*? Who are the Kodavas? Who are the Amma Kodavas?<sup>7</sup> The reason for my doubt is that the Kaveri Purana is written in Sanskrit and in our country, the knowledge of Sanskrit is negligible. We should depend on someone else for the translation. But, having dispelled these issues, having gone through the Puranas relating to the Mahadevi, and her relationship to the Kodava *vamsha*, and that every household should have this book, and by worshipping our reigning deity, Kaveramma, gain redemption from their sins, and for everyone to understand, the Kannada script has been used, and have made it into a play form...<sup>8</sup>

With this introduction of the play, Appacha unequivocally states his intention. On close scrutiny of Appacha's peculiar form of introduction we find that Appacha intended the *Kaveri Nataka* as his magnum opus with a hope to impress upon the people of Kodagu his literary prowess, but more importantly, to confer a glorious ancestry for the Kodavas through the creation of a 'legitimate myth' (or history) that was buttressed by borrowing heavily on various elements of the original Kaveri Purana.

In the play, the story of King Chandravarma takes an interesting twist and appears as follows:

Taking my army along, securing the *Chandraayudha* (*peehekathi*, the traditional knife of Kodavas) in my waist, I (Chandravarma) went to Bengal and conquered all the Kingdoms there. I heard that one of my uncles was going to marry the only daughter of the King of Nepal. Since there was a dearth of Kshatriyas in Krodadesha, I waged a war against him, killed him in the battlefield and kidnapped the mother and daughter of the Nepal King and brought them back to Krodadesha with me. Sage Kavera was delighted at the idea of me having a *kulapatni* to bring prosperity to my Suryavamsha lineage and advised a Kshatriya marriage. I said that I do not have any Kshatriya family members here, and the Guru is foremost in my culture. He thought awhile and suggested that a *gandharva* marriage be conducted, by Chandrakaantini, the mother of the bride, as the honorable person sprinkling the holy water from Lake Bakeshwara. Later, as per the sage's orders, I went back to Bengal with Chandrakaantini and declared her son as King, and brought back a great army of Kshatriya warriors, soldiers and laborers. With their help I built palaces and cities and forts aplenty. My second queen duly gave birth to my children, and the eldest, Devasharma is now the crown prince! And this is now the birthplace of my entire clan!<sup>9</sup>

This rendition of Appacha explaining the origin of the Kodavas is an important modification to the original Purana. The Sudra mediation, as recorded by Richter (1870), has been completely erased. In the original narrative, Goddess Parvati grants King Chandravarma a Sudra wife who bears him eleven sons who are known as *Ugras*, children born of the union of a Kshatriya man and a Sudra woman. The reason for Appacha's willful modification of the Kaveri Purana was to cleanse the Kodava race of the Sudra lineage and accord them the 'purity' of the Kshatriya lineage. One of the ways of ensuring this elevated status was through a clever employment of the mechanism of Sanskritization.

#### SANSKRITIZATION AND HARADAS APPACHA

Sanskritization was defined by M.N. Srinivas (1989) as the process by which a 'low' caste or tribe or other group takes over the customs, rituals, beliefs, ideology and style of life of a high and, in particular, a 'twice-born' (*dwija*) caste. The Sanskritization of a group has usually the effect of improving its position in the local caste hierarchy. It normally presupposes either an improvement in the economic or political position of the group concerned or a higher self-consciousness resulting from its contact with a source of the 'Great Tradition' of Hinduism such as a pilgrim centre or a monastery or a proselytizing act.<sup>10</sup> These following examples examine how the phenomenon of Sanskritization becomes evident through Appacha's treatment of the Kaveri Purana in his play.

Here are some instances of Sanskritization in the Kaveri Purana:

a. *The removal of Sudra mediation*

An important instance of Sanskritization in the Kaveri Purana, as mentioned earlier, is the removal of the Sudra mediation to ensure a 'clean' genealogy or bloodline for the Kshatriya Kodavas. Thapar (2014: 49) is of the opinion that some dynasties of obscure origin supported their claim to being Kshatriyas by having genealogies fabricated for them linking them to ancient lineages, such as the Suryavamsha (the solar lineage) and the family of Rama, or the Chandravamsha (the lunar lineage) and the descendants of Puru. Such claims became quite fashionable after the sixth century AD when mention is made in the Puranas of the making of what are called 'New Kshatriyas'.<sup>11</sup> This idea confers a sort of royal descent to the Kodavas, emancipating them from a group of forest dwellers to that of what she calls 'New Kshatriya'. All these communities would hold steadfast to the idea that they are products of a 'historicized myth' which celebrates the actual occurrence of a systematic performance of events that are 'true', however illogical it may sound.

b. *The supremacy of Kaveri over Ganga*

By transposing the Triveni Sangam analogy in the Kaveri story, it lends an equal supremacy to both Kaveri and Ganga, thereby implying that

Kaveri is no less sacred than Ganga. An important point to note here is that in the original Purana, it is Goddess Paravati who incarnates as Lopamudre. However, in Appacha's version, it is Goddess Lakshmi who takes the form of Lopamudre. This seems natural since he called himself a '*hara-dasa*' or a 'devotee of Lord Vishnu'.<sup>12</sup> He uses this modification to his advantage to justify the supremacy of Kaveri over Ganga by including another sub-text in his play. In act 5, in scene 8, he introduces a scene where Ganga goes to pay her respects to Kaveri. Ganga says that she is, in fact, Kaveri's daughter. Since she was born at Lord Vishnu's feet, Vishnu is her father and Goddess Lakshmi, by extension River Kaveri, is her mother. Ganga also declares that once a year she takes a dip in the waters of Kaveri to rid herself of the sin of having pierced the earth so hard on her way down from heaven.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the supremacy of Kaveri over Ganga is permanently etched in the Kodava psyche through the medium of this play.

c. *Linguistic Sanskritization*

Appacha employed a unique style of Kodavattakk, the language of Kodavas, which enriched the vocabulary of the language by leaps and bounds. Appacha 'invented' words that were never before used even in oral literature let alone, in common parlance. He was perhaps trying to establish an unquestionable 'purity' of the Kodava language, as not a 'derivative' or an 'offshoot' of some other major, mainstream language, but as a pure and ancient language of the Kodavas alone, like Sanskrit is to the Brahmins.

It can be seen that Kodavattakk has undergone ample Sanskritization at the hands of Appacha Kavi. I define linguistic Sanskritization as the way in which the vocabulary of any vernacular language is modified to sound like Sanskrit, an ancient language that is generally accepted worldwide as highly complex and refined, and dwelling in the realms of the erudite Brahmins. Drawing from Srinivas' explanation, the Sanskritization of a language too presupposes an improvement in the status of the language of a particular group resulting from its contact with a 'greater' language.

Having been exposed to temples, Brahmins, Puranas, prayers, *ragas* and *bhajans* during his days as an officer at the Bhagamandala temple division, Appacha's first mechanism was to use plots from ancient Hindu Puranas in his works. By adapting it to the Kodava ethos, he partially succeeded in his attempt to create a rich 'history' for the Kodavas. Secondly, he freely borrowed words from Sanskrit to suit the Kodava ambience, thereby enriching the existing Kodava vocabulary. Finally, he renders a 'Sanskritic' quality to the language through the extensive usage of metre and alliteration in his verses, and also the use of *ragas*, which was normally considered the forte of Carnatic music, then rendered usually by upper caste Brahmins whom he encountered during his formative years as a

poet and playwright. He not only scripted songs in Kodavattakk but also trained his actors to sing these songs in important *ragas* like *Kalyani*, *Hindustani*, *Kaapi*, *Ketaara*, *Behaag*, *Mohan*, *Khamaaj*, *Kharharpriya*, *Mayamaalavagoula*, *Shankaraabharana*, *Ghazal*, *Kamboji*, *Bilaahari*, *Poorva Kalyani*, and *Neelambari* among others.

Below are some examples of Sanskritization of Kodavattakk:

In *Kaveri Nataka*, the different names of Kaveri are listed by the *sutradhaara*:

Kapile Kalyaaniye! Kumudaa Devi Kauberi Shri Kaveriye! Vimaleye Vishweshwariye! Bhramaraambikeye!<sup>14</sup>

Ambaamahajaga! Shumbha Shumbha Samhaara Gauriye! Chanda Munda Daitya Naashini! Chandike Devi! Chamundidurgi! Shaktini, Kaamaakshini Meenakshi!

Bhagavatini! Raktha Beejasurana Nashini! Mahisha Mardini! Tharinimani! Dweepaavasini! Maari Maha Kaali! Yogeshwari! Bhairavi! Buvaneshwari! Shive!

Mahadevi, Mahakali, Mahamaaye, Maheshwari, Jaganmaya, Lokapoojya, Kavera's daughter, Kaveramme!<sup>15</sup>

This invocation song bears strong resemblance to some portions of Adi Sankara's *Soundarya Lahiri* eulogizing the beauty, grace and munificence of Goddess Parvati, and also to *Devi Sahasranaamam*, a text from the Brahmanda Purana of Hindu mythology invoking one thousand names of Goddess Parvati.

In all these verses, there are myriad references to the Hindu Puranas and to the gods of the Hindu pantheon. Appacha employed all the *Navarasas* from Bharata's *Natyasastra* in the creation of his plays. It was obvious to him that since there is limited vocabulary in Kodavattakk, it is difficult to create meaningful literature. But by pushing the limits of the language, which until then, was used only as a mode of banal, everyday communication, he has indeed propelled the language towards upward mobility through Sanskritization.

#### MANIFESTATIONS OF THE KAVERI PURANA

Quite often, myths become recorded as a historical truth and are proliferated through media like theatre, music, dance and festivals, which commemorate that myth through harvest festivals and even in marriage rituals. Let us now look at some examples of the manifestation of the Kaveri Purana in Kodagu's social and cultural life.

##### a. *Songs on Kaveri:*

Appacha's *Kaveri Nataka*, his magnum opus, was performed extensively in Kodagu and thus the invocation to river Kaveri became very popular in the collective Kodava psyche. The song '*Kaveramme Devi Thaayi Kaapaadaengala*' (*ka:veramme de:vi θa:ji ka:p:dengA(a:)*) which translates to, 'O Mother Kaveri, protect us!' composed by Appacha as an invocation to River Kaveri, has earned a special, divine status. This song later on became

one of the usual 'prayer songs' for almost all important functions in Kodagu. Kodava women also dance to this song in their traditional Ummathaatt dance, to the rhythm of cymbals. Songs on Kaveri are also recited for most public functions organized by the CNC (Codava National Council) or the Kodava Sahitya Academy. Such a reiteration of the myth through songs in the everyday lives of the community leads to a strong belief in the authenticity of the myth which then easily assimilates itself as the history of that community.

The rest of the song is translated as follows:<sup>16</sup>

O Kaveramme, Goddess, Mother Protect us!  
 Show us the correct path and shield us from evil  
 You became the adopted daughter of Lord Brahma  
 With no sign of fear, you dared to leave the dreaded Sage Agastya  
 At Bhagamandala, along with the River Kanike<sup>17</sup>  
 You came to the blessed Balamberi<sup>18</sup>  
 Saw all the Kodavas waiting for you in obeisance  
 To the Ammas<sup>19</sup> and the Kodavas you gave your faithful word.  
 In our lives and to our land, you brought prosperity  
 To the famous Ocean you finally join.  
 For all the deeds the men on Earth had committed  
 You cleansed them of all their sins with no disparity  
 O goddess, full of Maya, I fall at your feet  
 Reassure me and bless me and protect me O goddess!

In Kodagu, most festivals, rituals, public meetings, and sports events invariably begin with a prayer song in the form of an invocation to Kaveri who has been appropriated as the Mother goddess of Kodagu, designated as '*Kaveramme*'. Although there are variants of the Mother Goddess cult in Kodagu, in this particular instance, Kaveri is revered as the 'Mother' and all the people of Kodagu are her children.<sup>20</sup> As is seen in the lyrics, Appacha attempted to raise the morale and create a feeling of unity among the Kodava population by asserting the Kaveri myth as the legendary backdrop to the origin of the Kodavas.

*b. Kaveri Sankramana*

The *Kaveri Sankramana* is an important festival for the Kodavas. Apart from Kodavas, devotees from Karnataka and particularly from neighboring Tamil Nadu also visit the Talacauvery on the auspicious day of *Kaveri Sankramana*. Also known as *Kaveri Sankranti* or *Kaveri Changrandi*, this day celebrates the birth of River Kaveri in Kodagu. On the day of *Tula Sankramana*, which is the first day of the Kodava month of *Toleyar* around mid October, it is said that water surges up from the spring in the small

pond at Talacauvery at the precise moment when the sun enters *tula rasi* (Libra constellation). On that day, the holy water from Talacauvery is brought to every Kodava household and is stored with reverence and used as a cure for ailments and diseases, and also at deathbeds, much like the *Ganga jal* popular across India.

The Kodavas believe that the land belongs to Kaveramme and that they are the natural care-takers of the land. Every year, during *Kaveri Sankramana*, Mother Kaveri is said to visit Kodagu to inspect the progress of her country, and take back the land that is rightfully hers. Kodavas, in order to surmount the loss of their land, place a post called *bott* in their fields, on the banks of wells, near cattle sheds and other places as indicators to mark the flourishing cultivation of the land in their possession. *Bott* literally means, ‘to be frightened’, as the original owner (Kaveri) comes to claim the land. This tradition could indicate the fear that the caretakers of the land would have to relinquish their landownership to Kaveri, or as a mark of obeisance and submission to Kaveri.

The day after *Kaveri Sankramana* is observed as *kani puje*, or ‘worshipping the earth’. This tradition is nowadays barely followed in most Kodava households, with the members being content with a token gesture of tasting the waters of Kaveri. In some places, *kani puje* is celebrated on the Kodava New Year, or *Edamayar*, which falls in April—the same time as the festival of *Vishu* is celebrated in Kerala and *Bihu* in Assam.

c. *Ummathaatt*

The Ummathaatt is the only dance performed exclusively by women in Kodagu. Ummathaatt is a group dance performed by six or more women dancing around a lamp, keeping rhythm with their *tala*, or cymbals. This dance originally used to be performed in temple premises as a ritual. In due course, it was performed in village grounds during local festivities and also important family events in ancestral homes. Of late, the Ummathaatt has gained prominence as an important marker of Kodava culture, being performed on stages, competitions and entertainment venues. The attire for the dance is the Kodava style sari, usually red in color, with golden colored dots embroidered on it, worn with the pleats at the back. A *mandevastra* or a veil covering the head is also part of the attire. The jewels worn are the traditional Kodava necklace called *kokkethaathi*, a crescent shaped large sized pendant, and a *jomale*, gold beads strung on a black thread. The blouse is with full sleeves or three fourth sleeves with the wrists adorned with gold bangles. The movements are slow and according to the cadence provided with the clap of their cymbals, sometimes increasing in tempo and rhythm. The songs are usually in praise of Kaveri, or ‘welcome songs’, inviting friends and relatives for get-togethers.

There are at least three or four songs that are danced to in a typical Ummathaatt performance, with most songs praising Mother Kaveri. For some songs like *Bandira Bandira Bendukalellaa*, *Kaveramma Kondaadi* (bāṇḍi:ra bāṇḍi:ra bendukalella: ka:veramma konda:di, Come come, O relatives, let us celebrate Mother Kaveri), the steps involve a hop-skip motion, and a slightly faster beat, with the cymbals still keeping the rhythm of the song. There is a very 'local' feel to the Ummathaatt, something Bharata's *Natyasastra* would refer to as the *Lokadharmi*, which typically means one that refers to the 'loka' or worldly activity of the people. It does not draw on a prescribed codification of gestures (*hastas*) and gaits (*gatis*), but has its own modes of exaggeration and emphasis.

The sari pleats tucked in at the back, and the constant bending motions symbolize the agricultural work in the fields while transplanting paddy or while clearing forested land for cultivation of coffee and cardamom, or chopping firewood into smaller pieces. The skipping motions in the dance steps, the cymbals keeping rhythm, and the interaction with other members, and the addition of the lamp in the centre, add aesthetics to the realistic activity, making it a significant art form of the people. Over time, this came to be performed as a dance to welcome occasional, important visiting relatives. Those days, in joint families, there would be about at least twenty or thirty women performing the dance. Gifting the girls a pair of cymbals as a wedding gift was customary.

The music and songs that accompanied the dances have not received adequate documentation. The popular song *bandira bandira bendukale* is very recent and was composed by the poet Haradas Poovaiah in the early 1990s. The *Pattole Palame* (1924), a collection of oral literature and folksongs of Kodagu, first compiled by Nadikerianda Chinnappa, does not mention the specific compositions to which the Ummathaatt is supposed to be danced to. Bacheranianda Appanna, a litterateur and Kodava scholar believes that the *dudi*, or the traditional drum, is what the Ummathaatt was earlier performed to.<sup>21</sup> The songs in praise of Mother Kaveri, such as *Kaveramma devi thaayi* by Appacha (1918) and *bandira bendukale* (1990's) began to be used for Ummathaatt only in recent times. Earlier, Ummathaatt was performed to the accompaniment of only the *dudi*, a traditional percussion instrument. Sometimes the drummers sing folk songs and the dancers sing along. One of the folk songs is translated as follows:

i: okka maṇekk beṇḍu ṛiṇḍi bāṇḍi:ra

You have come to our *okka*<sup>22</sup>

i: okkaḍa ka:roṇa ka:roṇaḍa:ja und

This *okka* has its own *guru kaarona*<sup>23</sup>

a: okka mʌnel tʃenda ba:ʃe kʌnðole  
 That *okka* has a great crop of bananas  
 roṁṁakka perkkʌd kʌkkʌtra kʌllole  
 Like the strong stones of the parapet wall, let the girls grow  
 a:ŋa:ʃ na:ʃad ka:ve:ri mʌnʌro:le  
 Like the sands in the Kaveri, let the boys grow  
 nellakki perkkʌd mʌnʌpole  
 Like grains of sand, let the rice grow  
 igguθa mʌʌmode pimundama:riʃad  
 Let the granary be full like the Igguthappa hill  
 ka:poʃel kʌllole adʒdʒʌnʌdʒdʒi ba:vʌd  
 Let the grandparents live long like the rocks in the river will  
 pa:vakkera pu:pole pa:makka perkkʌd  
 Let girls grow like the flowers of bitter gourd  
 kaipakkera pu:pole kaimakka nʌlijʌd  
 Let the children grow like the flowers of bitter gourd  
 pa:θoreda pu:pole pa:kunji bolijʌd  
 Let the babies grow like the flowers of bitter gourd  
 pa:baʃʃi ka:i pole okkakodi nʌʌʌ  
 Let the branches of the *okka* grow like the fruits of bitter gourd <sup>24</sup>

This song has been handed down through generations orally and is almost impossible to date. The significant point to note here is that the Ummathaatt which used to be performed in village temples has undergone gradual transformation by being performed in ancestral Kodava homes known as *ainmanes*, and recently as competitive stage performances and as tourist attractions with the invocation to Kaveri as one of the main themes. The Ummathaatt is now performed as a competition event by different Kodava Samajas in Kodagu, and even as an entertainment section during the opening and closing ceremonies of events like the Kodava Hockey tournament. Inevitably, the Ummathaatt has transcended the sacred space of the temple and has comfortably settled into the profane or everyday space like a hockey ground, or a competition venue. A general protocol is now in place with the insistence on wearing matching colors of saris by the entire team, and sometimes even the insistence on attractive girls performing the Ummathaatt.<sup>25</sup>

Some movements and steps of the Ummathaatt have even been modified to resemble Bharatanatyam with the use of hand gestures (*hastas*) as it transited from a sacred space to a secular one. The secular space also lends the freedom to experiment with the movements of the dance, and the music. Performances of the Ummathaatt on a competition scale or as entertainment, and also by giving it wide coverage in local and national media, is an attempt to present the Ummathaatt, the ‘dance of Kodagu’, as a unique feature of the Kodavas. The modification of movements in the Ummathaatt indicates a gradual

transition from the Lokadharmi to the Natyadharmi style, which I argue is an attempt at Sanskritization intended to ‘classicize’ Ummathaatt to be at par with other classical dance forms of India. By upholding the songs about Kaveri in the Ummathaatt, thereby stressing their strong affinity with the river and thus their status as Kshatriya Kodavas, the uniqueness of the Kodavas is asserted through a ‘classicized’ representation of the Ummathaatt.

#### MYTH AND POWER-PLAY

Thapar (2000) argues that in the *Ithihasa –Purana* tradition, as far as the origin myths are concerned, it is mainly the Kshatriya status that is sought to be validated.<sup>26</sup> Appacha, through his *Kaveri Nataka*, has done well in clearly locating places of importance in Kodagu like the Talakaveri and Bhagamandala and linking them to a myth that follows a ‘bloodline’ or a ‘lineage’ rendering Kshatriya legitimacy to the Kodavas, which is widely accepted as the ‘truth’ of the Kodava origin.

I argue that there is a prime reason for this stubborn claim to the ‘truth’ of the Kaveri Purana and its relationship to the Kodava identity. The grand narrative of the Kaveri Purana indeed provides the much needed legendary backdrop to the Kodava lineage. However, a more critical interpretation of the play text reveals the constant reiteration of the ‘Kshatriya’ motif in the projection of a legitimate Kodava identity.

In Appacha’s plays, as well as through other manifestations of the Kaveri myth, the ‘Kshatriya’ motif is employed to resonate signs of physical power, manliness, Domination and weaponry. This affinity to Kshatriyahood is not devoid of the question of power. As Thapar emphasizes, (2014: 279) an identity is not created accidentally nor is it altogether innocent of intention.<sup>27</sup> Power and power-play come into perspective when the issue of the politics of separate statehood is embroiled with the performance of the Kaveri myth in everyday life. The motif of the ‘Kshatriya Kodava’ is employed in political campaigns of the CNC through recitation of poems such as *Kodavaloo Thokkoo* (kodava|u: to:ku , Kodavas and the Gun) in which it states:

The Kodavas of Kodumale (Kodagu) are a warrior race  
In every house there is a gun, that’s the sign of a Kshatriya  
Kodavas know not several other castes  
But only the heritage of a warrior lineage

Another instance of the propagation of the Kshatriya Kodava warrior can be seen through the image of the ‘Coorg Warrior 1839’.

Let us examine closely the ‘Coorg Warrior 1839’. This image is based on a medal that bears the stamp of a man wielding a gun and an *odikathi*, a short sword-like weapon, braced for attack, with a *peecekathi* neatly secured in the knot of his waistband. This image is now being circulated widely as a ‘marker’ of Kodava identity. These stickers are available in the market and are



Coorg Warrior 1839

seen displayed on most vehicles in Kodagu. Even some of the jerseys in the annual Kodava Hockey Festival have this image printed on them, along with their family names.

Another articulation of the 'warrior lineage' of the Kodavas can be seen in the political pamphlet of the CNC describing the celebrations of Public Puthari, the annual harvest festival of Kodagu, which states that 'The said celebrations are intended only to exhibit vibrant cultural heritage of Codava Warrior tribes from time immemorial and our unbreakable connection with the Codava Mother Soil.'<sup>28</sup>

Thapar says that politics was an open arena and these claims to Kshatriya or aristocratic identities as part of legitimation were required only to legitimize the family currently in power.<sup>29</sup> Or, to elaborate further along Thapar's lines, the family/community that laid claims to aristocratic identities had an easy shortcut to the seat of power. On a larger scale, this is apparent in the Kodava scenario too, with the demand for a separate state completely under Kodava governance.

#### SOME TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

By way of a tentative conclusion, I would reiterate that any myth in its current form evolves through years of its usage in multiple social, political, economic and cultural contexts. Consequently, the 'truth' of the myth changes with

several modifications, manipulations and retellings of the same myth by different people or communities over the years. In Kodagu, as we have examined in this essay, events incorporating references to River Kaveri and enactments of her divine presence are held on to steadfastly even in modern times. Malinowski's (1948) view that myths were essentially charters of validation on which the aim was very often to provide a sanction for current situations becomes relevant in the study of the Kaveri myth. The myth is rooted in the present while drawing 'legitimacy' from the past, however 'authentic' the past may seem to be or not. The quality of the myth of being devoid of validity assessment, while at the same time, being accepted by a community with which the myth is concerned, gives the myth, or the 'myth-makers' a strange power. This power makes it possible to provide, a 'sanction' for the present, in addition to evoking a sense of nostalgia for better times as theorized by Malinowski.

It seems that the Kaveri Purana continues to help sanction an idea of a 'legitimate history' for the Kodavas and that the incorporation of the myth into their history and their everyday lives serves to solidify that 'history'. However, it is important to remember that the evolution of the myth is a constant phenomenon, and that as the myth evolves, it serves the motives of the 'users' of the myth in whichever way it is required to. When an attempt is made to associate a myth with the history of a community, it becomes particularly necessary to examine the evolution of a myth in order to understand why an identity was initially constructed and how it was subsequently used in public culture, and why it may have become redundant and also manipulative in nature. As Thapar observes, ostensibly, the myth may relate to race or religion, but implicitly, it may be connected with other intentions such as access to power or aspirations to status and validations of political identity.

While, on the one hand, the unverifiability factor of the myth makes it a powerful tool to be manipulated as history, on the other hand, the same factor makes it susceptible to criticism, thereby facilitating a resistance to it being accepted as the 'truth' of the people. The question of what constitutes 'the people' is as much a significant issue as 'the truth' that is upheld in their name. In this regard, one should point out that several communities of Kodagu such as the Kudiyas or Airis who speak the Kodavattakk language and who also claim to be the original inhabitants of Kodagu have pointed towards a supremacist tendency on the part of the Kodavas and have expressed dissatisfaction with the exclusion of their communities in the projection of the 'grand history' of the Kodavas. All these communities also revere River Kaveri even though many of their origin myths are not connected with the river. With such resistances in place at a local level, embedded within the minutiae of caste, the question of whether the resurrection of the Kaveri Purana ultimately succeeds in providing 'legitimacy' to a singularized Kodava political identity remains to be seen.

## NOTES

- 1 Thambanda, Vijay Poonacha 2004. *Conflicting Identities in Karnataka: Separate State and Anti-separate State Movements in Coorg*. Hampi, Prasaranga.
- 2 Thapar, Romila 2014. *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities Through History*. New Delhi, Aleph Book Company, p57.
- 3 Rao, B.R. Ramachandra, 2011. *AgastyashramadindaKuberashramadedege* (From Agastyashrama to Kuberashrama), Udupi, Honnapadma Printers, p22-25. [Kannada].
- 4 In some accounts the name appears as 'Devasharma'.
- 5 Ponnappa, K.C. 1997. *A Study of the Origins of Coorgs*. Lt. Col. Kongetira Ponnappa, Chettalli, p14-15.
- 6 Rao, B.R. Ramachandra, 2011. *AgastyeshwaradindaKuberashramadedege* (From Agastyeshwara towards Kuberashrama) Udupi, Honna Padma Printers, p2. [Kannada].
- 7 Another community in Kodagu.
- 8 Appacha, Haradas 1998. *Haradas Appacha Kavira Naal Nataka* (Four Plays of Haradas Appacha Kavi), Madikeri, Karnataka KodavaSahitya Academy, p1. [Kodavattakk].
- 9 Ibid, p59-60.
- 10 Srinivas, M.N. 1989. *The Cohesive Role of Sanskritization and Other Essays*. New York, Oxford University Press, p56.
- 11 Thapar, Romila 2014. *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities Through History*. New Delhi, Aleph Book Company, p49.
- 12 The poet's name has been mistakenly printed as 'Haridasa' (meaning, devotee of Lord Shiva) in a newspaper article in 1928 as "Kodagu's Haridasa in Mangalore". Excerpt from Haradas Appacha Kavi's Autobiography.
- 13 Appacha, Haradas 1998. *Haradas Appacha Kavira Naal Nataka* (Four Plays of Haradas Appacha Kavi), Madikeri, Karnataka KodavaSahitya Academy, p143. [Kodavattakk].
- 14 Appacha, Haradas 1998. *Haradas Appacha Kavira Naal Nataka* (Four Plays of Haradas Appacha Kavi), Madikeri, Karnataka KodavaSahitya Academy, p4. [Kodavattakk].
- 15 Ibid, p109-110.
- 16 Translation, mine.
- 17 Kanike is another river that appears in the Kaveri Purana along with, Sujyoti, a third mystical river, fashioned on the lines of the Saraswati. The three rivers meet at Bhagamandala, just as in the Triveni Sangam at Prayag.
- 18 Earlier known as Valampuri, more recently as Balamuri, is the town in Kodagu where Kaveri is said to have blessed the Kodavas in the Kaveri Purana.
- 19 Ammakodavas, another Kodavattakk speaking community of Kodagu.
- 20 Of the Mother Goddess cult, Kosambi (2000:90) says that the goddesses are mothers, but unmarried. No father seemed necessary to the society in which they originated. It might be reminiscent of a matriarchal society that gave a lot of power to the women. The Kodava society has undergone a change from a matriarchal society to a patriarchal one. M.N. Srinivas (1952:45) says that it is probable that in the last 200 years, Coorgs have oriented themselves more and more towards the patrilineal Kannadigas and moved away from the matrilineal Nayars.
- 21 Interview with Bacheranianda Appanna, dated 12/03/2017, Kushalnagar.
- 22 Clan/ Family.

- 23 Ancestor
- 24 Bacheranianda Appanna recites from memory, dated 12/03/2017, Kushalnagar, [Kodavattakk]. Translation and transliteration, mine.
- 25 Interview with Bacheranianda Appanna, dated 12/03/2017, Kushalnagar.
- 26 Thapar, Romila 2000. *Cultural Pasts : Essays in Early Indian History*. Delhi, Oxford University Press, p778.
- 27 Thapar, Romila 2014. *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities Through History*. New Delhi, Aleph Book Company, p279.
- 28 Press release of the Codava National Council dated 13/12/2016
- 29 Thapar, Romila 2014. *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities Through History*. New Delhi, Aleph Book Company, p25.

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The Kaveri Purana (chapters 11 to 14 of the Skanda Purana) is an early text that discusses the origins of the Kodavas. In the Kaveri Purana, Kodagu country was called Matsyadesha (matsya meaning fish, desha meaning country or nation). Matsyas were one of the Indo-Aryan tribes of Vedic India, inhabiting a place that roughly is the territory of Jaipur, in Rajasthan. In the early 6th century BCE, Matsya was one of the sixteen mahajanapadas, or great kingdoms, whose importance had dwindled. Kodagu Kaveri Kodava Skanda Purana Puthari Kailpodh guns Rifle Amma Kodava Kaniya. The district of Kodagu, located at the origin of the river Kaveri, surrounded by lush greenery and abundant wildlife, is home to several indigenous communities with a shared history and culture. This module looks at the various myths of origin, as well as recorded history, through which the distinct culture's rituals, customs, traditions of the people of Kodagu evolved. Chapters 11 to 14 of the Skanda purana (also known as the Kaveri purana) relate many of them. According to the most well known version, when the great ocean was churned by the devas and the asuras in order to obtain amrita, the elixir of life, Lord Vishnu turned into Mohini, a nonpareil of infinite charm and appeal, to distract the asuras and restore the elixir to the devas. The cult of the river Goddess began in Kodagu and was centered in Bhaganda Kshetra (Bhagamandala). The three major river islands at Kaveri have a strong Vaishnava heritage, with sculptures of Lord Vishnu in a reclining posture on the legendary seven-headed serpent (Sesha) as his celestial bed (Sheshashayana). These three temples are known as Adi Ranga, Madhya Ranga, and Antya Ranga. At the Purana Qila it seems to merge with hoary time and you begin to hear the sound of trumpets, the battle-cry of the warriors, the clash of swords, the whiz of a thousand arrows, the neighing of horses, the thunderous trumpeting of elephants and the piteous moans of the fallen being trampled upon by man and beast. Here, history is unfolded before the eyes. You see emperor and clown for what they really were, and you hear the perennial song of humanity of wars and conflicts, peace and tranquillity, power and glory, and then neglect and decay. The writer is a veteran chronicler of Delhi. Yo