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POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN KODAGU

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the socio-political landscape of Kodagu (Coorg), a distinct highland region in the Western Ghats of Karnataka, India. It examines how diverse kinds of political activism have been shaped by historical privileges, cultural uniqueness, and ecological weaknesses. Activism in Kodagu exhibits a complex interplay between ethnic identity and regional preservation, ranging from anti-colonial efforts to modern aspirations for geopolitical sovereignty and environmental conservation. The study explores the mobilization strategies of key ethno-political organisations, the Codava National Council (CNC), as well as current environmental movements opposing major infrastructure projects. Through a qualitative analysis of historical texts, ethnographic observations, and contemporary political discourses, this paper argues that political activism in Kodagu functions as a defensive mechanism against perceived cultural assimilation, demographic shifts, and ecological degradation. It highlights how regional groups negotiate their identities within the broader context of Karnataka's state politics and the Indian federal structure.

Key words-Political Activism, Kodagu, cultural uniqueness, environmental movements

INTRODUCTION

Meaning of the term Political Activism

Political activism includes a broad range of activities aimed at driving social, political, or environmental change. It involves individuals and groups trying to change public perspective, advocate for policy reforms, and confront injustices or accepted standards. Activists often engage in efforts such as protests, campaigns, lobbying, and grassroots organizing to address issues they perceive as critical to societal progress. Political activism is driven by the belief that collective action can effect change and shape the future. Through a variety of strategies, including protests, public demonstrations, social media campaigns, and educational programs, activists raise awareness of these issues. Activism often compels media outlets to cover issues they might otherwise ignore, creating a feedback loop that shapes public opinion. To get media attention, activists employ a variety of strategies, including planning sizable demonstrations, participating in acts of civil disobedience, and developing viral social media campaigns. News organisations are forced to pay attention when activists are on the streets, particularly in dramatic or confrontational situations, which spreads the activists' message to a larger audience. The public's perception of a problem can be greatly influenced by media coverage. While not all activism leads directly to policy change, successful movements can significantly influence public opinion, which in turn pressures politicians and institutions to respond. Policymakers find it challenging to disregard popular demands when activism acts as a catalyst to convert public feeling into political action.

Political activism is a dynamic force that profoundly shapes public opinion and drives societal change. By raising awareness, framing issues, and mobilizing collective action, activists challenge existing norms and highlight critical concerns that might otherwise remain marginalized (Krishna 2019, 486-488).

General Characteristics of Kodagu

Kodagu is the smallest district in Karnataka with wonderful and lovely natural sceneries. It is from the word Kudu (which means hilly place) that the word Kodagu has come. Madikeri, the capital of Kodagu is very small but beautiful town.

It is said that the term 'Kodagu' has been derived from 'Kudumalenadu'. In ancient Tamil literature, terms like 'Kudumalenadu' or Kudakam have been mentioned. 'Kodimalenad' meaning a dense forest land on steep hills is mentioned as the meaning of Kodagu, since Kodi means a summit or peak.

In spoken language of the Kodava, the term 'Kodayee' means hunting ground and from this word the name of the district might have been derived, is another view. In inscription No 347 of Chamarajanagar taluk, the area has been referred as 'Kudugurunadu'.

Lt. O'Connor, in his Memoirs of the Coorg survey is of the view that Kodagu may mean "country of millions of hills" indicating the hilly nature of the country. According to other sources, the word Kodagu means the land situated to the west, so called by the people on the Mysore plateau. The British anglicised Kodagu as 'Coorg' during their rule but the original name has been restored to Kodagu, and is often described as the 'Switzerland of India', 'Scotland of India' or the 'Southern Kashmir', etc.

The district has a mountainous configuration which presents a grant panorama of verdant valleys, fast-flowing streams, and lofty peaks. Towards west, the summit of the Western Ghats attains great heights and the entire western portion of the district is an unbroken chain of hills which appears like a formidable wall from the foot hills, on the side of Kerala. The highest peak of the district is Tadiandamol (1908 metres MSL). Close to this peak to the south-east, there is Sannamale, highest mountain in the former Padinalknad taluk, which overlooks the Kodamtora pass and is regarded as a sacred place. The table land of Madikeri maintains an average altitude of about 1166 metres above sea level and slopes down a little to reach 910 metres near Kushalnagar. This plateau is bounded on the west by the continuation of the Western Ghats which culminate near Bisle pass in Pushpagiri hill, (about 1870 metres MSL) which is a remarkable two-pointed hill of precipitous height and peculiar shape. The district has rich-flora and fauna, due to its forest cover there are three wild-life sanctuaries, (Brahmagiri, Talakaveri, and Pushpagiri) and one national park (Nagarahole National Park, also known as Rajiv Gandhi National Park)

Coorg or Kodagu is chiefly populated by its native ethnic tribes Kodava. Besides other principal communities that reside in Kodagu District are Kodagu Gowda and Muslims while the minor tribes that dwell in Coorg include Airi, Meda, Male-Kudiya, KembattiMarangi, Kapal, Heggade, Kolla, Kavadi, Kurubas, Koleya, Koyava, Kanya, Kudiyas, Banna, Ganiga, Golla, Thatta, Yerava, Malaya etc.

Kodagu's economy is mostly supported by agriculture, with rice and coffee being the primary crops grown there. Total agricultural land holders in Kodagu district are 68881, out of it 2166 are large agricultural land holders (more than 10 hectares), medium agricultural land holders 7787 (4-10 hectares), semi medium agricultural land holders 13455 (2-4 hectares), small agricultural land holders 16945 (1-2 hectares) and marginal agricultural land holders 28101 (below 1 hectares). The total area under cultivation is 167861.74 hectares.

The district's economy depends heavily on plantation crops. Coffee is the most significant plantation crop, as was previously indicated. The other important crops are pepper and cardamom. Though coffee was introduced into this region more than two centuries ago, under the patronage of the Rajas of Kodagu,

the credit for raising coffee on commercial lines goes to the Europeans who found the hilly area of the district very suitable.

Mr. Fowler established the first such coffee estate in the vicinity of Madikeri in 1854. The two types of coffee that are most commonly grown in the area are robusta and arabica. It is cultivated over 1 lakh hectares in the district, with 75,277 hectares of Robusta variety and 28,303 hectares of Arabica variation. Since 2010, India has produced approximately one lakh metric tonnes of coffee per year, out of which 70 per cent more than 2 lakh metric tons) is produced in Karnataka. 50 per cent out of it (more than 1 lakh metric tons) comes from Kodagu.

The district grows a wide range of horticultural crops in addition to coffee. Horticultural crops occupy 34254.39 hectares, or almost 22% of the district's total agricultural acreage. Cardamom, black pepper, oranges, bananas, ginger, areca, cocoa, and cashew are the district's principal horticultural crops. Other minor horticulture crops include mango, vanilla, pineapple, floriculture, sapota and jackfruit.

Pepper is mostly grown in certain tracts of Madikeri taluk, besides, in the neighbourhood of Somwarpet and Ponnampet.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: FROM INDEPENDENT PRINCIPALITY TO ESTABLISHMENT OF BRITISH RULE

Kodagu has been ruled over by many kingdoms. It is known from history that from 2nd century to the 6th century the Kadambas ruled the northern and southern part of the Ganges. During 12th century Kodagu was under Hoysalas. During 14th century the Muslims who came from the north of India defeated the Hoysalas and took over the kingdom. Later Kodagu came under the influence of the Vijayanagar kingdom. When the great Vijayanagar empire fell, it left a vacuum which was filled by local chieftains. These chieftains were constantly warring with each other and were later united by Veeraraja, a lingayat man. Veeraraja posed himself as a holy man to win the confidence of the chieftain. He finally established Haleri kingdom and went on to become the first king of Kodagu. Muddu Raja, son of Appaji Raja and grandson of Vira Raja was said to be reigning at Haleri in 1633. It is not known when he assumed the throne. Muddu Raja was said to be a popular king. Muddu Raja changed his capital from Haleri to Madikeri in 1681. He built a mud fort and a palace there in 1681. As the fort and palace was built by Muddu Raja, the whole place was called MudduRajaKeri which in course of time changed into Madikeri.

After Muddu Raja died in 1687, he was succeeded by his eldest son, Doddavirappa. He was an able ruler though surrounded by powerful neighbours neither the number nor the strength of his enemies seems to have affected his courage. During his time eight Coorg headmen called DeshaThakkas were nominated to look into and settle social and other disputes among the Coorgs. These headmanship or Thakkame were hereditary.

Doddavirappa Wodeyar's grandson, Chikkavirappa Wodeyar (1736–1766), succeeded in 1736. His father Appaji, was thrown into prison by Doddavirappa for causing the death of his wife at the instigation of his favourite mistress. Appaji Raja's only son, Chikkavirappa, also shared the confinement of his father. After Appaji Raja died in prison, Chikkavirappa was released and was made the king. As his early years were clouded by misfortune, he was sickly and suffered from nervous complaints. His reign was a weak one. During his reign Haider Ali, a foudar under Raja of Mysore rose to power. He conquered the Ikkeri (Bednur) ruler. As Haleri rulers had been subordinate to the Ikkeri rulers, Hyder Ali proclaimed himself the ruler of Kodagu. Hyder Ali sent an army under his general, Fazal Ulla Khan, to Kodagu in 1765, which was defeated by people of Kodagu.

Chikkavirappa died without children and hence the line of Doddavirappa became extinct. Doddavirappa's father, Muddu Raja had two sons besides Doddavirappa. His second son had settled at Haleri and the third son at Horamale, four miles west of Madikeri. After the death of Chikkavirappa, the Haleri and Horamale royal families ruled Coorg together for about four years. In 1770, both Muddu Raja and Muddayya Raja died within an interval of a few months. Then arose a dispute for the succession to the Coorg throne. Linga Raja, the younger brother of Muddu Raja, wanted to place his nephew Appaji Raja on the throne, while Mallappa Arasu, son of Muddayya Raja of Horamale, proposed his own son, Devappa Raja as successor to the throne of Coorg. The Horamale family was more powerful and hence Devappa Raja became the ruler.

Linga Raja sought Hyder Ali's help, who marched into Kodagu in 1733. But his forces were defeated by the Kodagu army at Yedavanad. However, he invaded Kodagu again through Balele in South Kodagu and marched on Madikeri which fell to him. He installed Linga Raja on the throne, extracting compensation for his victorious expedition on the former's behalf.

Linga Raja died in 1780. His sons, Virarajendra and Lingarajendra, being of tender age, entire Coorg came under Hyder Ali's possession and assumed guardianship of Coorg princes and were kept in the fort of Goruru in Hassan district, with their mother, sisters and cousins. He appointed a Brahmin, Subbarasayya as Amaldar of Coorg and he strengthened the Mercara fort and stationed a Musalman garrison there.

After the death of Haider Ali in 1782 and after the end of the second Anglo-Mysore war (1780-84), Tipu who had come to Madikeri, renovated the Madikeri fort by building it in stone and appointed his general Jaffar Kuli Baig as officer in charge of the fort. Madikeri was named as Zaffarabad (1785). The temple of Bhagandeswara at Bhagamandala was named as Abjalabad.

Tipu shifted the royal family from Goruru to Piriapatna. He placed a strict vigil on the house and the fort. Having been disgusted with the prevailing situation in Kodagu, some people went to Piriapatna in disguise and helped Doddaveera Rajendra to escape from prison along with his wife and brothers in December 1788. He settled in Kuruchi at the foot of Brahmagiri in Southern Kodagu. After encountering many difficulties Veera Rajendra was able to recover his Kingdom. Tipu sent his army to Kodagu under the leadership of Gulam Ali, the Kodagu army defeated Tipu's forces at Padinalkunadu, and conquered Sullya and Puttur which were in the possession of Tipu.

Robert Taylor, officer of the English East India Company who was at Talacheri (Tellicherry) made friendly understanding with Veerarajendra against Tipu. This agreement took place on 15th October 1790. In 1791 when the Third Anglo-Mysore war started, Veerarajendra helped the British for the movement of their troops from Tellicherry to Srirangapattana through Kodagu and provided food grains and other supplies and hundreds of bullocks for transporting goods. The Bombay Governor Robert Abercromby on his way to Mysore visited Kodagu and Veerarajendra had a negotiation with him at Maggula Village. The next year Veerarajendra founded a new township at the spot where he met the Governor. This is modern Virajpet. As the palace of Veerarajendra at Kuruchi had been destroyed, a new one was constructed in 1795, now known as Nalkunadu palace. Veerarajendra got himself crowned here in February 1796, and married Mahadevammaji, as he had no sons by his earlier marriages. At Madikeri an extension was named as Mahadevapet after the new queen. During the fourth Anglo-Mysore war, Veerarajendra helped the British as before. Tipu was killed at Srirangapattana and the Mysore kingdom came under the British.

The last ruler of Kodagu, Chikkaveerarajendra, was still young when he ascended the throne in 1820. He was inexperienced in the art of government, and was surrounded by evil counsellors and soon became unpopular with some of the Coorg Dewans and headmen. The Company's government in 1827, asked the Raja to send reports regarding the death sentences conferred by him on different occasions. The Raja protested over such instruction.

Chikkavirarajendra's sister Devammaji had been given in marriage to one Chenna Basavappa, who along with others formed a league to dethrone the tyrannical rule of the Raja. When Chikkavirarajendra got scent of the evil designs against him, he wanted to imprison ChennaBasavappa. But ChennaBasavappa along with his wife took refuge with British Residents at Bangalore. The people, men and women who were believed to have been privy to the plans of ChennaBasava, were killed or starved to death or thrown into prison. These cruelties of Viraraja accelerated his downfall. On 18th January 1833, Sir Fred Adam, Governor of Madras, addressed a letter to Raja, giving him advice on principles of good government. But Raja ignored his advice. The Company's official namely Griem (Resident of Nagpur) sent his advocate Karunakara Menon, but the Raja imprisoned him and refused to release him until ChennaBasappa was returned to him. The Governor General Lord William Bentinck's letter warning the Raja to release Karunakara Menon reached him in February 1834. When there was no response to the letter, the company government made a proclamation that the Raja of Kodagu had been deposed on 13th March 1834.

On 1st April 1834, the expedition began. The invading force numbered six thousand men was placed under Brigadier Lindsay. While Col. Fraser accompanied him as the political agent of the Governor General of Coorg affairs. The force divided into four columns which operated in the following manner - The British army under Brig. Lindsay came from Kushalnagar. Under Gen. Foulas, an army marched from Cannanore through Heggala Ghat. Yet another brigade rushed from the North under Col. Waugh which was held up from proceeding further through the gallantry of Mathanda Appachu. Another force facing Madikeri came from Mangalore under Lieut. Col. Jackson. The Coorg army fought excellently and were determined to save their country in spite of all the disadvantages. On 5th of April, Devan Apparanda Bopu, with a party of 400 Coorgs, went to meet Col. Fraser, surrendered to him and offered to take Company's troops to the capital. At 4 p.m on 6th April they entered the Fort of Madikeri, the Raja's flag was lowered and the British flag was hoisted under a salute of twenty- one guns.

On 23rd April 1834, Raja along with his family arrived at the Madikeri palace from Nalknad and from then on became the prisoner of the British. Col. Fraser was the first Commissioner and the Political Agent for Codagu. Brig. Lindsey, was honoured with the post of Knight Commander by His Majesty for his successful expedition in Codagu. Chikkaviraraja was sent to Vellore and from there to Benares. He was in the holy city for about fifteen years. In 1848, the Raja applied for permission to visit England with the object of educating his daughter Gowramma. He got permission in March 1850 and Raja along with his daughter sailed to England.

THE BRITISH COLONIAL IMPACT IN KODAGU

After Kodagu was annexed (1834), by the British, it came under the administration of the Foreign and Political Department of the Government of India with a common Commissioner for Mysore and Kodagu. Lt. Col. Fraser, the Political Agent, was the first Commissioner. Capt. C.F. Le Hardy was the first Superintendent. In the year 1834 important territorial changes were made. Amara-Sullia and Puttur taluks with an area of about 580 sq. miles, which were the part of Kodagu were separated and added to South Kanara. Kodagu then comprised of six taluks. A territory of 1585 square miles, it had 24 Nads (hoblies) and 508 villages. By continuing the old administration, arrangement was made for the appointment of Patel in the village, Parpattegar over Nadu or Hobli and Subhedar over taluk (Thammaiah 2021, 95- 110).

FROM ANTI-COLONIAL STRUGGLE TO PART C STATE

During this time, political activism concentrated on two fronts:

1. Supporting Mahatma Gandhi's anti-colonial movement throughout India.
2. Calling for responsible self-government under the Coorg Legislative Council, which was founded in 1924 by the British to satisfy local political ambitions.

The Civil Disobedience and Quit India movements saw active participation from both agrarian communities and the educated elite in Kodagu.

The Freedom Movement threw up several leaders from Coorg in large numbers to protest against the British rule. During the 'Quit India' Movement alone around 150 people were arrested in Coorg. Among those who were in the lead during the early years of the freedom struggle, were Congressmen - Pandianda I. Belliappa and Paruvangada Kushalappa.

The first batch of freedom fighters to be arrested in Coorg in 1930 were Pandianda Belliappa, Kollimada Karumbayya (who later became a Rajya Sabha MP in 1954-55), Janab Abdul Ghafur Khan of Bilugunda, and H. R. Krishnayya of Besagur.

Coorg women did not lag behind during the freedom struggle. The women who courted arrest were Baliyatanda Muddamma, Pandianda Seetha Belliappa, and Mukkatira Bojamma.

The Kodagu weekly, started by the Coorg Company in 1920, was largely instrumental in spreading nationalistic awareness among the people.

In 1929, Congress volunteers picketed liquor shops and other business establishments selling foreign goods at Virajpet and Madikeri. In a daring act, Mallengada Chengappa, B. G. Ganapaiah and Mandepanda Cariappa removed the Union Jack, and hoisted the Indian National flag at the Madikeri Fort in December, 1930.

Around the same period, C. M. Poonacha was involved in the composing, cyclostyling and distribution of a publication named 'Veerabharati' from Gonikoppal. The police finally managed to track the cyclostyling machine. Poonacha was sentenced to nine months rigorous imprisonment at Kannur jail.

Students of the Madikeri Central High School too participated in a strike, leading to the closure of the school for 10 days. The students arrested on the occasion included S. R. Narayana Rao (literary figure Bharati Suta), C. B. Monnaiah and Poojari Ramappa.

Public meetings were held at Virajpet, Gonikoppal, Hudikeri and Irpu to spread political awareness. Among those who addressed these meetings were Jammada Madappa, Chokanda Devaiah, Kalengada Chinnappa, Vokkaligara Annaiah, Ajjamada Madappa, Ajjamada Ayyamma, Ajjikuttira Chinnappa, and Ajjikuttira Ponnappa.

The freedom struggle peaked in Coorg during the Quit India movement. Pandianda Belliappa, Chekkera Monnaiah, and Kollimada Karumbaiah were arrested in August 1942. The events which marked the freedom struggle in Coorg go to prove that the people of Coorg did not lag behind in nationalist zeal and sacrifice (Bopanna 2009,59-62).

The two towns of Coorg, Mercara and Virajpet, were constituted in 1870 as municipalities. Each town was composed of committee comprising of ex-officio and nominated members. The Commissioner of Coorg was the President of the Mercara Municipality, while the Munsiff –Magistrate of Virajpet was the President of Virajpet Municipality. In 1901, a District Board was constituted to administer local funds. It was then composed of nine nominated, two elected and five ex-officio members under the presidency of the Commissioner.

A few English educated people of Coorg formed an organisation called the Coorg Land holders Association and began to agitate for change of government in the district. A resolution was passed in the meeting of this association requesting the Governor-General of India to amalgamate Coorg with the Madras Presidency. Consequent on this agitation of people of Coorg, and under constitutional reforms

introduced under the Government of India Act of 1919, Coorg was constituted as a Chief Commissioner's Province having a Legislative Council consisting of 15 elected members and five members nominated by the Chief Commissioner, of whom four were officials and one non-official to represent the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Of the 15 seats allotted for elected members, two seats were reserved for Europeans. The Chief Commissioner of Coorg was the President of the Council and The Commissioner was the member for finance and vice-president of the Council. This Council began to function from the year 1924.

Between 1924 to 1940, the financial condition in Coorg was worsening year after year. There were successive deficits in the Budget of the province. Therefore, the Government of India directed a general enquiry into the financial position. Mr. P.K. Wattal, then Accountant –General at Madras was appointed to carry out the enquiry. Mr. Wattal recommended among other things, (1) to divert the Resident in Mysore of his powers and functions as Chief Commissioner of Coorg and to raise the status of the Commissioner of Coorg to that of a Chief Commissioner and (2) to abolish the post of the Subordinate Judge in Coorg, and create a post of District and Sessions Judge. Accepting the recommendation of Mr. Wattal, the post of Commissioner of Coorg was abolished and his functions as Commissioner were divided between the new Chief Commissioner and the Assistant Commissioner. The office of the Chief Commissioner which was at Bangalore attached to the Resident's office was shifted to Madikeri in 1940. Thus, Coorg became a self –sufficient unit with all the offices located within its territory and was governed by a full-time Chief Commissioner.

On 31st May 1946, The Codagu Legislative Council elected Sri. C.M. Poonacha, to represent Codagu at Constituent Assembly of India. On 15th August 1947, when India became free, the state of Codagu also fell under the democratic government and the national flag of India was hoisted at the Madikeri Fort by the Chief Commissioner, Sri. K.M. Ketolira Chengappa. The constitution of India which came into force on 26 January 1950, categorised the earlier British Provinces as Part 'A' states; the Princely states as Part 'B' and the regions administered by Chief Commissioners were known as Part 'C' states. The State Reorganisation Commission was set up under Justice Fazal Ali, to decide the areas of the states depending on the language spoken. In 1952, the country had its first general elections. The merger became an important election issue in Coorg. Some of the prominent people in Coorg politics led by Pandiyanda.I. Belliappa opposed the merger of Coorg They broke away from Congress and formed a separate group known as the 'Coorg Separatist Party'. In the election out of twenty-four seats, the congress party secured fifteen seats; the remaining nine seats were won by anti-merger group. A seat of House of the People was secured by Sri. N. Somanna, of congress party. The new Legislative Assembly of Codagu was inaugurated on the 26th March 1952. C.M. Poonacha was elected as the Chief Minister and K. Mallappa as the Home Minister; B.S. Kushalappa was chosen as the Speaker of the House. Colonel Daya Singh Bedi, continued as the Chief Commissioner of Coorg state (Thammaiah 2021, 111-113)

THE 1956 REORGANISATION AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS

When the States' Reorganisation Commission (SRC) visited Coorg in June 1954, it marked the beginning of modern political grievance and agitation in Kodagu. The Coorg government asked SRC to suggest keeping Coorg as a distinct state. A unified memorandum was unanimously submitted to the SRC by all 24 members of the Coorg Legislative Assembly.

In a 10-page statement, they said as follows:

1. Coorg boundaries were natural.
2. Historically, Coorg had been a separate state for centuries past.
3. It was the only Part 'C' State which had the experience of a democratic institution since 1924.
4. Coorg had some distinctive features of its own.
5. Coorg had always been a surplus area in food grains. The literacy rate of Coorg had a high place in India. In medical facilities, Coorg was probably second only to Delhi among Part 'C' States.

8. In cooperative movement, Coorg had top ranking in the country.
9. The condition of labour was decidedly better than elsewhere in the country.
10. Coorg had a separate culture and individuality of its own. Coorg was more a multi-lingual state rather than a purely Kannada-speaking area.
12. Coorg was self-sufficient in finances.
13. As a separate and self-contained State, Coorg would strengthen the Central government.
14. Coorg was an ideal place to work out a model state.

The Congress which had strongly championed the cause of amalgamation of the state with Karnataka and had committed during the General Election to obtain the people's verdict after resigning from the Assembly, failed to keep up their word.

When the SRC visited Coorg, the government neither resigned, nor took the trouble to ascertain the wishes of the people.

On the other hand, the Congress conducted one or two public meetings and began claiming that the people were in favour of separation.

The two major Congress factions that had fought each other in the General Election had now agreed to make a joint demand before the SRC and called a truce.

In the March 1954 session, all 24 members of the Coorg Assembly unanimously passed a resolution that Coorg should remain separate. The secretary of the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee characterised this attitude of the Coorg Congressmen as a breach of discipline.

The Report of the SRC released in October, 1955. The SRC had recommended that Coorg be included in the proposed state of Karnataka. The Congress leadership issued directives to Congressmen not to hold protests over the Report. But the people held public meetings at several places and passed resolutions requesting the Union government to maintain the status quo.

In order to discuss the SRC Report, the Coorg Assembly convened on October 6, 1955. After a day-long debate, the resolution tabled by the Chief Minister that Coorg should be merged in the proposed Mysore State was adopted. The separatist group's leader, Pandiyanda Belliappa, supported the merger. Kolera P. Karumbaiah and Pattada C. Uthayya cast the dissenting votes. Apparanda C. Thimmaiah, who is well-known for his opinions on maintaining Coorg's independence, seconded the merger resolution during the discussion. He emphasised that the oppressive government of the preceding four years had persuaded him that Coorg would benefit from merging with Mysore State.

Following the merger, which took place on November 1, 1956, Coorg was reduced from a separate state to a single administrative district inside Karnataka.

This structural downgrade generated a deep sense of marginalization among the Kodava population. The loss of political leverage was severe, a region that once controlled its own budget and legislative destiny was now dependent on a distant state capital in Bangalore, where its political representation was diluted to just two seats in a 224-member legislative assembly. The district's current ethno-regional activity is still based on this historical grievance (Bopanna 2009, 27-29).

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

Large-scale infrastructure projects in Kodagu (Coorg) are mostly opposed by locals, environmentalists, and indigenous groups who worry that the delicate Western Ghats ecosystem would be destroyed by multi-lane highways, rail networks, and unrestrained commercialisation. Over the past three decades, civil society organizations in Kodagu like Coorg Wildlife Society, Cauvery Nadhi Swatchata Andolana, Save River Cauvery Forum, Kodava Samaja Ammathi, Coorg Wellness Foundation, Clean Coorg Initiative, have engaged in protracted battles against state-backed infrastructure projects that threaten the region's canopy cover and hydrological balance.

The opposition to the Mysore-Kozhikode 400 kV high-tension power line project was a turning point in this line of campaigning. Drawing the power line through Kodagu, according to local environmental organisations like the Coorg Wildlife Society (CWS) and the Save Kodagu Campaign, would require the

falling of more than 50,000 trees, disrupt important elephant corridors and increase human-wildlife conflict. The activism involved legal petitions in the National Green Tribunal (NGT), mass rallies, and blockades. While the project was ultimately executed with modifications, the mobilization solidified a permanent infrastructure of environmental resistance in the district (Devaiah 2014)

In 2011, the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Committee, led by Professor Madhav Gadgil, suggested designating the whole Kodagu district as an environmentally sensitive area. However, due to sustained campaign by politicians, the Union government set up the Kasturirangan committee in 2013 to review the Gadgil panel report. As per the Kasturirangan Report, about 37 per cent of the total area under Western Ghats is deemed to be ecologically sensitive. However, the political elite, supported by the Kerala timber lobby, has fiercely opposed even the Kasturirangan report's recommendations (Bopanna 2022)

In 2018, a retired military officer named Captain Chethan filed a writ petition in the Karnataka High Court challenging the exemption that the Indian government had granted to a specific group of people in the Kodagu district in order to obtain a licence to possess firearms under Sections 3 and 4 of the Indian Arms Act, 1959. The petitioner argued that the continuation of the exemption, granted to some class of persons by the British Government in pre-Independent India in furtherance of their divide-and-rule policy, was unconstitutional, as it was based on irrational, fictitious and discriminatory grounds, such as race and ancestral land tenure. According to the petitioner, those who are exempt are allowed to possess firearms and ammunition without having their criminal histories or backgrounds checked.

The Karnataka High Court, however, dismissed the petitioner's concerns in 2021 when it affirmed the exemption's constitutional legitimacy, arguing that it is a legitimate defence of an ancient privilege rather than a permanent infringement. In a notification, the Ministry of Home Affairs, said, "The arms or ammunition carried or possessed by any person being from Kodava by race and every Jamma tenure holder in Kodagu and herein exempted while residing or travelling outside the district of Kodagu shall not exceed one rifle with 100 rounds of ammunition for the same and one smooth bore breech or muzzle-loading gun with 500 cartridges or the equivalent in leaden shot and gunpowder". A home ministry official added that the exemption, valid till 2029, was given to the Kodavas as firearms were never misused in crimes or anti-national or anti-state activities (Firstpost.com 2021)

Over 10,000 Kodagu locals staged one of the biggest protests in February 2018 when they marched in Mysuru against the proposed Mysuru-Thalassery railway link, which the central government had approved on 13th January 2018. The growing opposition spiralled into full-fledged protests coordinated by Coorg Wildlife Society and a large number of organisations including Kodagu Growers Federation, United Kodava Organisation, Coorg Wildlife Society and Saver River Cauvery Forum, under the banner of 'Save Kodagu' and 'Save Cauvery' campaigns.

Public outrage erupted because local residents and environmentalists feared that building the rail lines would require cutting down over 1,00,000 to 2,00,000 trees. Protesters argued that losing trees would lower rainfall, dry up the river, and cause severe water crises for millions of people across Karnataka and Tamil Nadu who depend on it. Locals feared this would disrupt wildlife, leading to more elephants entering human villages and endangering lives, as the proposed tracks were mapped right through elephant corridors. As Kodagu is highly prone to landslides protestors argued that building railway tracks on weak hill slopes risked triggering devastating environmental disasters. The Karnataka High Court hearing a public interest litigation filed by Colonel Muthanna, president of the Coorg Wildlife Society and others against railway line from Mysuru and Thalassery via Kodagu in 2018 and a second railway line sanctioned in 2019 from Mysuru (Belagola) to Kushalnagar, disposed the case in October 2019 stating the Railways cannot proceed since forest and wildlife clearances have not been obtained. Eventually the controversial Mysuru-Thalassery project was scrapped by the Ministry of Railways,

keeping Kodagu as the only district in Karnataka without a rail network (Povaiah 2018), (Chatterjee 2019).

CONCLUSION

One analytical framework is insufficient to understand political activism in Kodagu. Ecological demands, cultural concerns, geopolitical setbacks, and historical privilege all contribute to these complex phenomena. A continuing commitment to keep a unique ethno-regional identity from being assimilated by bigger regional or national majorities is evident in the mobilisation trajectory from the anti-colonial fight and the protection of the Jamma tenancy to the contemporary demands of the Kodava National Council.

The local environmental organisations also have a deep comprehension of the Western Ghats' ecological significance on a worldwide scale. These movements demonstrate how local communities can oppose exploitative developmental programs by utilising constitutional and legal frameworks.

Kodagu's political activism will probably continue to swing between protective isolationism and progressive ecological conservation as it negotiates the demands of the tourism economy, natural calamities brought on by climate change, and shifting demographics. Future legislators and local leaders will face the difficulty of balancing these conflicting goals within an inclusive framework that

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