



Walking a Different Path

Koraga Community in Karnataka Organize for Rights

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Swapna Majumdar

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Koraga Community in
Karnataka Organize for Rights



We realized it was not our destiny to eat rice mixed with hair and nails given by upper castes as part of the ajalu ritual to transfer their illness to us.

Bogra Koraga

Leader of anti-ajalu campaign

When land ownership is in the name of women, it accelerates gender empowerment.

Gowri Kenjur

First woman president of
Koraga Federation

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Text: Swapna Majumdar

Photographs: Florian Lang

Titlepage Photograph: Koraga women and men playing drums and dancing during a meeting of Koraga activists in Kinnigoli village, Mangalore taluk, Dakshin Kannad district. Drumming has always been part of the Koraga culture but was also part of the ritual practices forced on to them – Koragas were expected to play the drums at deaths and socio-religious functions. While resisting the oppression, the community seeks to reaffirm their culture and identity by making music and dance an act of celebration.

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Foreword

Critical Stories of Change is a series of stories describing the role ActionAid Association and its partners play in changing the lives of people living in poverty. The stories are written by independent writers who are encouraged to be open and critical in their approach while celebrating the role of individuals, collectives and organisations in building up a process of change. Critical Stories of Change is an exercise in exploration, of the efforts of grassroots organisations that ActionAid Association support and ally with, from the perspective of impoverished and excluded people.

ActionAid Association looks to the process of developing these stories as an interaction with friends on their critical insights, suggestions and advice. The stories thus emerge as a product of a facilitated learning process involving both ActionAid Association and its partners, with the objective of understanding how change happens for the benefit of the poor and deprived. We publish these stories with the confidence that the documented lessons and experiences will provide insights for all those engaged in the struggle against poverty and injustice.

Walking a Different Path: Koraga Community in Karnataka Organize for Rights tells the story of a particularly vulnerable tribal group that has faced population decline to the extent that their current numbers are dangerously low. The story is about their resistance to oppression, especially the continuing practice of an extremely pernicious ritual. The Koragas have also organized against malnutrition, for land rights, towards securing sustainable livelihood, revitalizing their culture and building their tribal identity.

We are grateful to independent journalist Swapna Majumdar for capturing and sharing this story. We are confident that this publication will be of interest to all people interested in eradicating poverty, patriarchy and injustice.

In solidarity

Sandeep Chachra
Executive Director
ActionAid Association

Author's Note

As a journalist writing on development, I have seen caste oppression manifest in many ways. The *ajalu* ritual that the Koraga community in Karnataka are subjected to, however, left me aghast.

The *ajalu* ritual, banned by the Karnataka Koragas (Prohibition of Ajalu Practice) Act, 2000, has been described by the Act as the practice of “mixing hair, [finger]nails or any other inedible or obnoxious substance in the food and asking Koragas to eat that food.” *Ajalu* continues to be practiced covertly. Many among the Koragas believe that it is their duty to practice *ajalu*.

Hearing about this made me both angry and depressed. But when I learnt that the community was resisting this practice my hopes rose. I was eager to see how social change had been brought about by the community, working with the Samgra Grameena Ashrama (SGA), an Udipi-based non-government organisation and ActionAid Association (AAA).

What also whetted my interest was that the Koragas live in a matrilineal society, where husbands leave their homes to stay with their wives after marriage. I thought this would mean that there would be less domestic violence against women. Much to my dismay, I was told that such cases had been reported. Domestic violence is now being dealt with by a community court constituted by the Koragas. This court, comprising jury members from the community, meets once a month and dispenses justice.

The heat in Udipi and the distances I had to travel to meet the community while documenting this roller coaster journey of the Koragas was made worthwhile by seeing how an endangered community was awakening to its rights. The SGA has been working with the Koragas for over two decades. In 2000, the SGA and AAA began working together in project mode and enabled the Koraga Federation to emerge as truly representative of the community. The intervention set in motion steps to renew self-belief among this particularly vulnerable tribal group.

This report within the Critical Stories of Change series is a documentation of this work over a decade. Some of the strategies adopted have worked, others have not; I have tried to tell it like it is, blemishes included.

Being accompanied by Itishree Sahoo, monitoring and evaluation manager at AAA, was immensely helpful in writing this story. Her ability to understand the information I wanted and ensure it was made available was amazing. The nuggets of information she provided were also much appreciated. I thank Nandini, programme manager at AAA's Karnataka Regional Office at Bengaluru, who gave a backdrop of the work and the challenges they encountered. The perspective given by Ashok Shetty, coordinator at SGA, was invaluable. He has a remarkable memory and knows the community and its history inside out. This story would not have been possible without his contribution and his untiring efforts to help me comprehend the intricacies of the community struggle.

Last but not least, the incredible Koraga women – Sabitha, who made history by becoming the first Koraga to be appointed assistant professor; Sushila Nada, who overcame all caste hurdles and associated stigma to become an anganwadi worker, and Gauri, the first woman to head the Koraga Federation – prove, however clichéd it may sound, that where there is a will, there is always a way.

Swapna Majumdar

Introduction

Her hair is white, her face wrinkled. But her spirits are high as she belies her age to play the drum hanging around her neck. As she twirls round and round, the beating becomes more frenzied. The message is loud and clear; playing the drum, once considered a symbol of their caste untouchability, is no longer a stigma. Soon, more Koraga women participating in the community meeting join the celebrations, dancing and clapping. As the sounds reverberate, it drums a deeper message; with the awakening of their rights had come the determination to return to their matrilineal roots and regain their freedom to be equal partners in a life of dignity. Would this be possible?

In 1987, when Devdas Shetty, a social activist, began working for the oppressed and downtrodden in his native state of Karnataka, he found the Koragas, an aboriginal tribe, living in abysmal conditions. Considered untouchables, the Koragas, the most backward of all tribal groups in Karnataka, faced considerable social and economic deprivation. Various legislations like the Karnataka Forest Act, 1963 and the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, alienated the tribe from their sources of livelihoods. Ousted from forestlands their ancestors had occupied for generations, the tribal group eked their living from weaving baskets made from bamboo and forest creepers and manual scavenging. Afflicted by malnutrition, anaemia and fatal illnesses, mortality was high among the community.

Livelihood opportunities were severely limited and the survival of many Koragas depended on the whim and mercy of upper castes. The *ajalu* practice is emblematic of the severe oppression faced by the Koraga community. The word “*ajalu*” or “*enjal*” in Kannada has the same meaning as the word “*echil*” in Malayalam and Tamil and the word “*joothan*” in Hindi. There is no direct equivalent in English. “*Ajalu*”, “*echil*” and “*joothan*” all refer to food left over on the eating plate after a meal. Dalit communities across India have been forced through ritual practice, social oppression and poverty to eat these left overs. The belief is that misfortune is transferred from the upper castes to those who eat the

“leftover” food and receive old clothes. The *ajalu* practice in Karnataka includes adding hair and fingernails to the “leftover” food and giving it to the Koraga to eat. The Karnataka Koragas (Prohibition Of Ajalu Practice) Act, 2000, which has banned the ritual describes it as follows:

- (a) *“Ajalu practice ” means, performance of any act or ceremony -*
- i. differentiating between Koragas and persons belonging to other communities by paying no wages or lesser wages to Koragas for using their service;*
 - ii. treating Koragas as inferior human beings as compared to others;*
 - iii. mixing hair, nails or any other inedible or obnoxious substance in the food and asking Koragas to eat that food;*
 - iv. driving Koragas to run like buffaloes before the beginning of Kambala.¹*

The 1981 census showed that population of Koragas was just 15,146, leading the government in 1986 to notify the Koragas, living in Kasargod district in north Kerala and four districts in Karnataka (Dakshin Kannada, Udupi, Shimoga and Uttara Kannada), as a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG).

However, the Koragas were unable to access the government entitlements arising out of this notification, primarily because of ignorance and an overwhelming feeling of inferiority born out of the social oppression the community faced, including the practice of the *ajalu* ritual. Determined to help the Koragas overcome socio-cultural oppression and live a life of dignity, Devdas Shetty in 1987 founded the Samagra Grameena Ashrama (SGA). The focus of the Udupi-based social organisation was to empower the Koragas to break the shackles of caste domination and regain self-confidence and self-reliance.

A Community Awakens

Recognising that undoing the decades of suppression and exclusion would take time, SGA initially concentrated on reaching out to the community in two districts of Karnataka – Udupi and Dakshin Kannada – and in these districts mobilizing the

1. Kambala is an annual buffalo race held in rural Karnataka.

community only in three taluks or blocks. These were Udupi and Karkala taluks in Udupi district and Mangalore taluk in Dakshin Kannada district.

The focus in the early period was on helping the community with livelihood options, as alleviating poverty was an immediate concern. Even while providing the community with jasmine plants, coconut shells and yarn for basket weaving, SGA members held regular discussions seeking to spread awareness of rights and the need to raise their voice in demand for them. The need to stand up against the practice of ajalu also featured sensitively in these discussions.

It was to be a long struggle. But the efforts bore fruit after six years when the community finally took its first step towards self-realization. On August 18, 1993, such was the fervor that even incessant rains could not stop thousands of Koraga women and men from coming together to demand their right to land and livelihoods. This led the state government to institute a five-member commission, headed by eminent academic Dr Mohammed Peer, to study the social, educational and economic conditions of the Koragas and recommend an action plan for their development. This was to prove historic for the community. The decision to allocate land to the community was taken by the government after the commission, of which Devdas Shetty was also a member, presented its report in 1994 recommending 2.5 acres of land be given to each Koraga family.

It was to be a long struggle, but efforts bore fruit when the community finally took its first step towards self-realization.

The implementation of this decision, however, was poor and tardy. Although ownership was in the name of women, only a few Koragas received land. This discrimination led to several vocal community protests. In 1999, during one such rally, when the community showed no signs of bowing down even after 40 days, the police tried to stifle the campaign and clamped down on the protestors. Many Koraga leaders were jailed during this movement for their land.

It was at this critical juncture in 2000 that ActionAid Association (AAA) reached out to SGA to strengthen the Koraga people's struggle for their rights.



Tomu, a 70-year old Koraga woman near Kinnigoli town, Udipi district. Tomu still lives a traditional Koraga life. She wears old clothes collected from upper caste Hindus. She had participated in the oppressive ajalu throughout her life. Since her husband died, she is not called to participate in ajalu anymore.

“We supported SGA’s work because it is a unique initiative to empower the Koraga community. Also, it was in keeping with ActionAid Association’s objectives to protect the rights of tribals to food, land and identity. Initially, we helped SGA for short-term periods, beginning in 2000. Then, in 2003, as we saw the positive impact of our collaboration on the community, we decided to extend it to a long-term partnership. Our goal was to provide an enabling environment for the empowerment of the Koragas, and to help strengthen their education, health and livelihoods. Additionally, capacity building of the community would enable them to influence government policies in their favour. Thus, when we finally moved out, the community would be self-sufficient,” explained Nandini, programme manager, ActionAid Association Karnataka Region.

Building Community Organisations

The roadmap towards making the Koraga community self-sufficient was prepared right in the beginning. Since the process of change had to come from within, one of the first things initiated was the process of inclusion. The registration of the Federation of Koraga Development Associations, a body of, for and by the



Ashok Shetty, the coordinator of Samagra Grameena Ashrama (SGA), an NGO that supports the Koraga tribe in the process of empowerment.

Koraga people, a process facilitated by the SGA and AAA, opened the doors for members of the community who were still outside the umbrella of the Federation.

District and taluk committees of the community were established as integral members of the Federation, and the scope and reach of the community organization expanded. Each Koraga Zilla Samiti (district committee) comprised one member from all the grassroots level Koraga Abhivridhi Sanghas (groups working to restore Koraga dignity) in the districts. The Koraga Taluk Samiti or the taluk/block committees constituted one member each representing the Koraga Abhivridhi Sanghas in the taluks. Thus, the Federation was able to connect with the community at the village, block and district level with advocacy inputs and review of development programmes.

“Prior to its registration, there were a select few Koragas who would take the decisions related to their districts and taluks,” said Ashok Shetty, coordinator, SGA. “But once the Koraga Federation was registered then it had to bring in representatives of the Koraga Abhivridhi Sanghas (local grassroots community committees) that had

been formed in the three districts where SGA was working. This immediately made decision-making more collective and inclusive.”

Embedding Gender Equality in the Federation

There was a stress on ensuring equality in gender representation in the Federation. This meant more women in the Federation as well greater leadership roles for them. The Federation Board was structured to enable the inclusion of two members from each grassroots sangha with gender parity. Not only would one of the two members be a woman, but five of the nine General Body members would also be women. Shetty recalled that initially there was opposition to including women in the top position of the Federations. “Since the time the organisational process started, all the decisions had been taken by men. It took some time to convince them that it would help the movement if women were given greater responsibility,” said Shetty.

Once that hurdle was crossed, SGA began working towards AAA’s suggestion of empowering at least 200 Koraga women to assume decision-making positions. This led SGA to expand its area of work from three to five taluks and reach out to two additional sub-castes within the Koraga community. In the early years, SGA had limited its work to just two sub-castes. Later, it would also reach out to the Koraga community in Kasargod, Kerala.

With the Koraga Federation now formally invested with the power to take the struggle forward, the organisational structure was also strengthened. P. Gokuldas, one of the first Koragas to graduate, was chosen to lead the movement as its president. Gokuldas, who had earlier headed the Dakshin Kannada district unit of the Federation, was the ideal person, and not just because he had faced the travails of being a tribal person and had overcome obstacles to work in the government’s postal department. It was also his knowledge of the community’s history and his desire to empower the Koragas, especially the women, that was to prove critical to guiding the movement within the framework of a rights-based approach.

It was decided that the campaign would work towards achieving four basic rights. These were the rights to livelihood, education, health and, dignity. Importantly, it was decided that gender equality would be inherent to all strategies developed towards accessing these rights.

Abolishing Ajalu, Paving the Way for a Life of Dignity

The year 2000 was path-breaking for another reason. The unrelenting struggle by the Koraga community for a life of dignity culminated in the enactment of a law to ban the practice of ajalu. Under the Karnataka Koragas (Prohibition of Ajalu Practice) Act, 2000, treating Koragas like inferior human beings and forcing them to practice various ajalu rituals would now be a crime. Further, flouting of any provisions of the Act was punishable by imprisonment (between six months and five years), as well as a cash penalty.

“The Act helped to vindicate our stand that practicing ajalu was not our duty but a ritual that had been perpetuated to oppress us,” said Bogra Koraga. A member of the Federation, the 50-year-old was in the forefront of the awareness campaign run by Koraga leaders like Gokuldas and SGA to make the community understand that *ajalu* was a violation of their human rights.

The momentum towards getting a law to ban the ajalu practice gained ground only after community leaders like Bogra became active participants in the campaign. Getting Bogra to lead the anti-ajalu movement proved to be a turning point considering he, like most of his village community, believed practicing ajalu was his duty mandated by God. It was the death of his friend in 1998 while performing an ajalu ritual that convinced him that the Koragas were losing their lives in vain and that religion had nothing to do with it. “Since then, I started to mobilize the community to stop practicing ajalu, especially the humiliating ritual of running across the fields before the beginning of Kambala, a traditional buffalo race, celebrated annually by the farming community in Dakshin Kannada district,” Bogra recounted.

The momentum towards getting a law to ban the ajalu practice gained ground only after community leaders like Bogra became active participants in the campaign.

Building a Broader Engagement

While the passing of the anti-ajalu legislation was a big shot in the arm, the Federation and its leaders also realised that a true life of dignity would only be possible when all Koragas were free from malnutrition and under-nutrition, and had



Bogra, a Koraga, became an active fighter against the cruel and demeaning practices of *ajalu*

land and livelihoods. In 2001, after learning about the Kerala government scheme that gave free nutrition for particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs), the Koraga Federation and SGA came up with a proposal for Koragas along the same lines. They advocated that, just as the Kerala government had given work to PVTGs for four months during the rainy season and had provided free rice and green gram during this period, the Karnataka government should follow suit. As PVTGs, the Koragas were entitled to free nutrition as well. They also needed to assert the rights of the Koraga community to land and forest entitlements.

Struggle for Right to Nutrition

The 2001 census, which indicated that the population of the Koraga tribe was on the decline, added urgency to the campaign for nutrition. From 16,322 in 1991, by the end of the decade the population of Koragas had fallen to 16,071. Demanding action be taken before it became too late, the campaign for free nutrition took to the streets in 2002. A community meeting was held outside the offices of the district commissioner in Udupi and Dakshin Kannada to voice their needs. However, this did not have the desired effect. Seeing the tepid response of the local government, the Federation, SGA and AAA got their heads together and changed their strategy.

It was decided that more evidence of the devastating impacts of malnutrition and under-nutrition would be gathered to strengthen their demand for free nutrition. The SGA undertook a study of women's reproductive health, growth patterns of children and the extent of anaemia prevalent among the Koragas as a consequence of the lack of proper nutrition. It was no surprise when the study revealed high levels of anaemia among men, women and children. It was clear that anaemia was the main cause of underweight children and, poor reproductive health.

Backed by this evidence, efforts to get the government to act were intensified. In addition to public meetings and other interventions initiated over the next two years, SGA and the Federation reached out to elected representatives. Starting from the gram/village, taluk/block and zilla/district panchayat, the campaign connected with members of the legislative assembly to lobby for a free nutrition programme.

Such was the intensity that in 2005, the Udupi district administration, in collaboration with SGA, drafted a nutrition plan and recommended its implementation by the state. This was followed by a similar plan being sent by the Dakshin Kannada district administration in 2006. It seemed that the scheme would finally see the light of the day when the plans came up for discussions before the state department and the tribal directorate in the same year.

However, the campaign hit a roadblock when the state was engulfed in political turmoil. Over the next two years, political instability meant no decision could be taken, although the government then in power assured action. But the Federation did not give up. When governor's rule was imposed, it was seized as an opportunity to get a favourable decision. Although the Governor assured them that the Koragas would be given free nutrition, nothing much came out of it.

Despite these setbacks, the Koraga Federation did not lose hope. Community members were encouraged to keep the spotlight on the issue by writing postcards to concerned officials in Udupi and Dakshin Kannada districts demanding the free nutrition plan be accepted and implemented. In May 2008, when the coalition of Janata Dal (S) and Bharatiya Janata Party formed the government, the campaign was renewed with them. Once again, the then chief minister, social welfare minister and local MLAs reiterated their commitment to implement the scheme.

As the months went by in wait for the government to make good its promise, the number of postcards written increased. By October of the same year, 50,000 postcards had been sent to various officials demanding the free nutrition scheme. Just how effective this would be was proven a month later.

In November, unable to ignore the growing pressure from the Koraga community, the government finally announced nutritional food support would be given free to all 3542 Koraga families living in Udupi and Dakshin Kannada districts. But it did not accept the demand that the nutritional support be given for all 12 months. Instead, the government limited the free distribution to the four months of the rainy season. The demand for milk and eggs was also not acceded to. Under the scheme, 10 kg rice, two kg lentils, one kg sugar and one kg green gram would be given free in addition to the subsidised foodgrains the Koragas could buy from local rations shops. But since the monsoon season had already passed, the scheme would roll out only in 2009.

Upholding Land Rights

Even as the campaign for nutrition was gathering steam, strategies to uphold the Koragas customary right to land and forest entitlements were being developed alongside. Discussions within the Federation and its various block and district representatives were centred on how to get the government's ear. In 2001, the first bugle for land rights was sounded in Kalathur in Udupi district. While this coming together of the community helped to highlight their plight, it was the presence of a dynamic district commissioner in Udupi that really paved the way. By 2003, not only did he complete the identification of land but he also ensured the distribution of 117 acres to Koragas living in Udupi.

However, Koragas living in Dakshin Kannada district were not so fortunate. The Federation and local district unit members were unable to get the district administration to follow the Udupi example, despite holding public meetings. But in 2005, when these tactics didn't bring the success they had hoped for, a new plan, suggested by the women members, was adopted.

"We decided that the best way to get the government to listen to us would be to occupy forest land," recalled Gowri Kenjur. Then the general secretary of the Federation, the 35-year-old Gowri said it was the encouragement the women

received from the Federation, SGA and AAA to be assertive participants in the land rights movement that gave them the confidence to take the lead.

It was decided that the plan would be executed on October 2, the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, in keeping with his principles of protecting the rights of the downtrodden. Over 3000 community members, the majority of them women, from the three districts gathered in Paladka village in Moodbidri block of Mangalore district. Chosen for the forestland that the Koragas had traditionally occupied, Paladka village was to become a landmark in the land rights movement. As the women led the procession towards the forest, with beating drums resonating across the village, police and forest officials cordoned off entry points.

“The police tried to stop us. So we sat down in the middle of the road in protest. Night fell but we still didn’t back down. Many officials came and told us that our demands would be looked into and to ask us to return home. But we agreed only after the Assistant Commissioner came to meet us at 9 pm with the assurance that he would personally look into the matter and action would be taken within 10 days,” recalled Gowri.

True to his promise, a meeting was called to discuss how land could be allocated to the Koragas. Besides members of Koraga Federation, it was attended by officials from the departments of revenue, forest, land and administrative reforms. Land surveyors also attended.

This started the process of land identification. However, instead of following a regular distribution schedule once land had been identified, it was sporadic. Not only did it come in bits and pieces over the following three years, it did not cover all families. Although officials empathetic to their cause pushed for allotment of land, bureaucratic delays halted the process. And if these supportive officials moved out, as it happened many a time, the whole process of getting land entitlements had to be reinitiated with the new officials, thus adding to the delay.

Women Take the Lead

Although some advances had been made, it had not been easy. The Federation knew they were in for the long haul. The challenge before them was to prevent their motivation and efforts from flagging in view of the slow progress in realising their rights.

But how was this going to be done? Could the baton be handed over to the Koraga women who had been at the forefront of the struggle for land and nutrition rights? Although the matrilineal system followed by the Koragas meant that women of the community were traditionally the decision makers in their families, could they lead the way not just to access their rightful entitlements to land, but also to education and health? More importantly, could they claim their place in the sun in this endeavour for a life of dignity?

However, their potential began to be tapped in a more focussed manner after 2000. A concerted effort since then to build the capacity of women to be equal partners in the movement has catapulted many women into the spotlight. Among them was Gowri Kenjur. An active member of the community campaign since 1994, Gowri used this training to hone her abilities. In the 2001 Kalathur land movement, she was among the 27 community members who went to jail for 15 days after the police cracked down on their public meeting.

Signs that women were ready to take up leadership responsibilities came early in the Koraga movement for land, livelihoods and dignity.

Gowri's leadership qualities gave her a chance to work at the organisational level. In 2003, Gowri was chosen to be general secretary of the Federation for a period of two years. During this time, she had the opportunity to work closely with Federation president P. Gokuldas and was able to get a better understanding of the various dimensions of the community struggle. In 2006, Gowri was elected as the first woman president of the Koraga Federation.

"This was a big moment for me as well as for all the Koraga women. It was a recognition of our abilities," said Gowri. In fact, she is the only woman to be elected president twice, the first time in 2006 and then again in 2007.

Increased Participation of Women

As president, Gowri pushed for greater participation of women from the community and encouraged them to stand up for their rights. Training and awareness-raising programmes about various government entitlements and how they could be accessed boosted the confidence of women. In particular, this dissemination of

information came in handy for self help groups (SHGs) formed to give women more control over their resources.

A prime example of the power of information and collectivisation came when SHGs from four villages held a joint meeting against their panchayat, who were blocking women's participation in planning the allocation of the local budget for tribal welfare.

Once they became aware of their rights, over 42 women sat dharna until the heads of the panchayat agreed to develop a new action plan in accordance with the suggestions given by the women with respect to education and drinking water for children.

Inspired, another two SHGs in a neighbouring block also sat on a dharna in front of their panchayat office, demanding water supply be given to their cluster. Although a tap had been installed, there was no water connection. About 32 women remained steadfast that, until their right to drinking water was upheld, they would not end their dharna. Despite assurances given by the panchayat leaders and officials of public works department, the women refused to budge. It was only after the water connection was given and water gushed out of the tap that the dharna by the women ended.

Improvement in Nutrition

Nutrition, too, was high on the women's agenda. Having been trained about the nutrition components of the food they ate and its impact on their health, many women grew nutritious vegetables in small kitchen gardens. However, a 2009 study conducted by SGA showed endemic anaemia among 80 per cent of women. This prompted the decision to engage with the government to revive its demand for wheat, eggs, edible oil and jaggery to be included in the free nutrition package. The state had agreed in 2008 to implement the free food package proposed by the Federation only for four months of the monsoon (June to September) and including only rice, sugar and pulses.

A year later in 2010, the government finally agreed to expand the food items included in its nutrition package. However, instead of extending it to the whole year, it limited the programme to six months. One big achievement, however, was the institution of a committee comprising members of the Koraga community and officials to monitor the distribution process and ensure transparency.

Since 2010, all Koraga families receive 15 kg rice, three kg green gram, two kg Bengal gram, two kg jaggery, one kg ragi, one kg edible oil and 30 eggs each month. “All this is distributed through anganawadis for six months a year, from June to December,” said Sabeer Ahmed Mullah, Mangalore project coordinator, Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP).

According to Nandini, programme manager at AAA’s Karnataka Region, community participation in the implementation of the scheme has brought about visible change in the health of the tribal women.

Combating Substance Abuse and Violence Against Women

Even as health gains were being made, the problem of violence against women still loomed large. During discussions on the issue, alcoholism among the men had emerged as a primary root cause of the problem. Efforts to sensitize the community on the dangers of alcohol and tobacco consumption were therefore stepped up. Besides street plays, taluk and zilla Koraga committees undertook padayatras and held meetings to draw community attention to these issues. Women led campaigns to close arrack shops and de-addiction camps were held. These were successful in weaning many individuals away from alcohol.

It was a de-addiction camp that helped Bogra, one of the leaders of the anti-ajalu campaign, get back on track. Bogra confessed that alcoholism had led him to blindly follow the ajalu rituals as well as behave violently towards his wife and children. “It was hard to give up alcohol. But I was encouraged by the Federation and SGA to persevere,” recalled Bogra. So even though he returned to drinking local toddy after the first stint at the de-addiction camp, the Federation members didn’t give up on him. They continued to motivate him to try again, leading him to go through the de-addiction process for the second time. This time he was finally able to give it up. Then, having understood the difference it made to his health and family life, Bogra motivated several others to follow his example.

Namma Nyaya Koota – a Novel Community Court

Women also complained that the existing community laws and norms were violating their rights. Even though gender sensitization events were held, the

women wanted more concrete mechanisms to deal with the problem. “We questioned the personal law of the community, which was more favourable towards men. Our show of collective spirit led the Federation to give the problem serious thought and to introduce the concept of a community court,” revealed Sushila Nadda, former Federation president and treasurer.

In 2010, a year after mulling over its structure and working with the district legal aid authorities, the court began formal proceedings and began hearing cases. The court comprised five jury members and is headed by one chief judge, all from the community. Legal training has been given to them by lawyers from the district legal aid authority.

The court, which assembles once in a month, does its own fact finding. The five jury members investigate the cases filed before them and even discuss details with the lawyers of the district legal aid authorities if required. The judgment given by the court is considered final and binding on both defendants and respondents.

Balraj Koraga has been the chief judge of the court since its inception in 2010. After passing Class 10, he began working in the Mangalore city corporation office as a helper. But his acumen and ability to grasp legal dimensions has contributed to his election to this position for the past four years. According to Balraj, most of the cases that have come before them over the last four years have been related to violence against women and disregard of the matrilineal system followed by the community. “We are getting more cases of violence against women because more and more women are approaching us with their complaints. When women get justice, they spread the word and more women come forward. They have the confidence now that their voices will be heard and justice will be given. Usually, the family tries to resolve the cases first. If that is not possible, then the case comes to court,” said Balraj.

Giving an example, Balraj narrated the case of a woman who went to the police to complain against the man who promised to marry her but had deserted her when she became pregnant. Instead of helping, the police turned her away saying it was her fault she had become pregnant. She then approached the community court. “We heard both versions and found the boy guilty and took action.” recalled Balraj.

Violence against women is a concern, pointed out Balraj. The Federation was looking into the reasons for its escalation. It is probably the influence of urban culture. But it is definitely a challenge for us,” he revealed.

Building Identity, Revitalizing Culture

Besides violence against women, among other challenges that surfaced during the periodic progress reviews of the intervention by SGA and AAI, included the dilution of Koraga culture and the emergence of patriarchy in a traditionally matrilineal society.

The dilemma now was whether the Koragas were inadvertently being pushed away from their own culture. “Drum beating and playing the flute were unique to Koraga culture. But since both had been associated with ajal, beating the drum and flute playing had stopped because of the stigma. There was a need to counter the stigma so that the Koragas could revive their culture,” said Nandini.

Re-affirming Identity

One of the ways devised by the Federation to eliminate stigma was by celebrating “Bhoomi Habba”, a festival to commemorate their first protest for land rights in 1993. It would be celebrated on August 18, the day the protest began. This celebration would help to rejuvenate their identity and promote *dolu-chande* (beating drums) and playing the flute.

For the Koraga community there is no word to describe a woman on the death of her husband.

In 2008, celebrations were initiated by former Federation president Gokuldas by beating the *dolu* (drum). Then, led by Balraj Koraga, then Federation president, about 450 community members walked down the road singing, dancing and beating drums. Balraj recounted how much the moment had meant for all of them, particularly the elder members of the community. He said honey was distributed to all the participants by an elderly Koraga woman who believed that its sweetness would wipe out the pain the community had suffered for so long and give them the confidence to rebuild their identity.

One of the ways to give the community a sense of their identity has been documentation of their history. Since 2012, efforts have been being made to collate proverbs, beliefs and rituals typical to the community from their senior members. Additionally, existing literature available from British historians and anthropologists as well as studies on Koragas by the Mangalore University and

Revitalizing Culture



Drumming has always been part of the Koraga culture but it has been misused by upper castes as a part of *ajalu*, a set of cruel and demeaning practices. Music is now taken up as a form of self-expression. *Top:* Koraga women and men playing drums and dancing during a meeting of Koraga activists in Kinnigoli town, Mangalore taluk, Dakshin Kannada district. *Above left:* Young women responding to the question posed: "How many would live in their mother's house after marriage?" at Ambedkar Bhawan in Adi-Udipi town, Udipi district. The Koraga traditionally are a matrilineal society where kinship is traced through the mother. *Above right:* In the same meeting Situ shows the kind of mala (necklace) which traditionally was worn by married Koraga women. *Left:* India. Bebi weaving baskets in Kanjar Katte.

Kannada University in Hampi are also being put together with the help of scholars from these institutions.

Indigenous knowledge being an important resource, there have also been initiatives to revive the language, religion, music, and traditional skills of the community. Identifying male and female heroes and popularizing them through street plays and dance and music by their cultural troupes has educated people about their cultural roots, which are little known to the community's new generation. A flag representing the community has also been developed.

Asserting Women's Rights

While assertion for identity was being encouraged, attention was also given to raising awareness about the progressive values in their matrilineal system and the need to resist acceptance of patriarchal norms that denied women their rights. Youth and women's groups were given the responsibility of reviving matrilineal values.

The Koragas have much to be proud of, said Shashikala, the leader of the women's group in Karkal taluk. "Not only is the birth of a girl child celebrated, but there is no system of dowry either. There is no word to describe a woman on the death



Shashikala Koraga, community leader and board member of Samagra Grameena Ashram, speaking in Kinnigoli, in Mangalore taluk, Udipi district, during a campaign on violence against women and girls of Koraga communities from different districts of Karnataka and Kerala.

of her husband, thus eliminating the stigma widows in a patriarchal system undergo,” Shashikala pointed out.

Manjula from Gunmi taluk in Udupi stated that Koraga women had equal decision-making powers. But it was after interaction with SGA and Federation members that many women asserted their power, she said. Manjula revealed she took the decision to leave her violent husband after nine years of marriage only after her association with the Federation. “I worked in a coir factory. But my husband was suspicious. He would beat me. So finally I left him and remarried,” she said.

Sushila also broke tradition when she called off her engagement because she wanted to study. At the time of her engagement she was studying in Class 8. “I don’t regret taking the step to break off my engagement. I got the opportunity to study,” said Sushila.

The first girl in her village to acquire a post graduate degree, Sushila is a role model for many other girls in the community. “I don’t consider marriage the ultimate goal. I am still single and happy. In our matrilineal society, women have freedom of choice in all matters. But somehow this is getting forgotten,” she said.

Sushila, Shashikala and Manjula are part of larger groups of women who meet once a month to discuss how they could preserve their culture, traditional practices and way of life, especially within the matrilineal system. “We talk about how to return to the practices which valued girls, practices which were an inherent way of their way of life,” said Padma, a SGA member specially deputed to study the matrilineal system. She said that since 2012, SGA had been in the process of analysing all Koraga rituals and



Manjula Gudmi, a member of the Koraga community who is active in the Federation, left her husband, who was violent.

their significance and whether the society was slowly moving towards patriarchy. The intervention seeks to sensitize the Koraga community and hopes to reinforce the gender equity that traditionally existed in the matrilineal system.

Transforming Lives

Helping the campaign for gender equity is 40-year-old Sheena and his 34 year-old wife Mamta. Residents of village Kanjarkatte in Udupi district, the couple not only have equal decision-making powers but also share the household expenses and even have separate bank accounts.

But it was not always so. Spending a part of his meagre income as a sweeper at a hotel on alcohol had pushed the uneducated Sheena further into indebtedness and poverty. Life took a turn for the better after he became a part of the Federation in 1999. Not only was he able to give up his alcohol addiction with their help, but his incomes also improved after he opted for jasmine cultivation, which was offered as a livelihood rehabilitation solution. A major part of the profits that Sheena makes from selling the jasmine is ploughed back into improving cultivation. The rest is used for household expenses. Mamta, who received training from the Integrated Tribal Development Programme under their livelihood scheme to make and sell costume jewellery, also pools in a part of her income. “Since we both work now and share the expenses, I no longer need to take loans to make two ends meet as I did before I joined the Federation,” said Sheena.

Both are keen to give their three children a good life. Being a part of the Federation, Sheena is aware that *ajalu* has been abolished and makes sure none of his children are forced to practice it. Having accompanied his parents to collect left-over food as a part of *ajalu* rituals as a child, Sheena knows the impact it had on his self-confidence. Even today, he is shy and prefers his wife Mamta, to do all the talking. She is more articulate, having studied till Class 8. Dropping out thereafter for marriage has strengthened Mamta’s desire that all her children get the opportunity to study as much as possible. Marriage can wait, she said.

The money saved is being used to help Mamta and Sheena’s eldest son become a doctor. “I want him to become a doctor. He is in Class 10 now. I am paying for his tuition so that he can study medicine,” said Mamta, who is also the secretary of the taluk committee. She knows her rights and has also ensured that her four year old

Transforming Lives – Mamta and Sheena



Top: Mamta and her husband Sheena started successful small-scale production of ornaments with jasmine flowers grown on their own land. Kanjar Katte village in Udipi district. *Above Left:* Mamta plucking the jasmine buds. *Above Right:* Mamta displaying the range of costume jewellery she is producing and selling. *Left:* The child sitting on the extreme right is the daughter of Mamta and Sheena. Happily, she does not face any discrimination in the childcare centre.

Transforming Lives – Girija Jannadi and her Family



Top: Girija Jannadi with her mother Gowri and niece in Hardalli-Mandalli village, Udipi district. A beneficiary of the land rights movement. *Above Left:* Girija working on her land, where she grows vegetables. *Above Right:* Girija displaying sweet potatoes grown on her land. *Left:* Girija showing the washing powder she is also producing for the local market.

daughter goes to the nearby anganwadi. She is the only Koraga child in that anganwadi. But she faces none of the discrimination her mother faced when she went to school thanks to the enabling environment created by the Federation with the help of Mamta and other women of the community.

Ensuring Sustainability

Women like Mamta are the backbone of the Koraga movement for gender equality and have helped to carry the campaign to empower the community even after the ActionAid Association supported project ended in 2013. The work put in by the Federation of Koraga Development Associations to make the community believe in itself and stand up for its rights has brought tangible outcomes. All Koragas now have the Antodaya Anna Yojana card, which entitles them to subsidised rations. Not only have the community organisations been able to get the government to distribute a free nutrition package for six months a year but they have also advocated with the government to have this extended to nine other vulnerable tribal groups living in the Western Ghats area. These include the Jenukuruba, Bettakuruba, Yerava, Soliga, Malekudia, Gowdlu, Hasalaru and Siddi communities.

This was an outcome of the work of the Karnataka PTG Community Federation, an alliance made with the Jenukurubas of Kodagu and Mysore districts by the Federation of Koraga Development Associations and SGA in 2010 as a part of building a larger coalition for the rights campaign. The decision to expand was part of their strategy to strengthen the movement by joining forces with other particularly vulnerable tribal groups.

In 2012, when this alliance extended its outreach to the other communities (Bettakuruba, Yerava, Soliga, Malekudia, Gowdlu, Hasalaru and Siddi) living in eight districts of Western Ghats area, it took them under their fold, forming the Karnataka Aranyamoola Bukattu Samudagala Okkuta (Karnataka Forest Dweller Federation).

The impact of building advocacy through this larger alliance was seen in February 2015, when the state government announced that all beneficiaries would receive a three-fold increase of each food item given under their free nutrition package.

Further, there has been no let up in the campaign for land rights, even after getting the government to allocate land to over 900 families and ensuring these land



Rajesh K. C. is Panchayat Development Officer at Grampanchayath Hardalli-Mandalli, Udipi district. A former activist of the Samagra Grameena Ashrama, Rajesh continues to do his best for the community.

deeds are in the name of women. In fact, in 2014, a year after the project ended, the movement for land rights was continuing in Hardallimandalli and Yedadimathyadi villages, located next to the Manjeri forest in Udipi district.

Women groups in these villages, all part of the Federation, have staked their claim to land. They are following the same strategy of encroaching land that was successfully adopted by the Federation to claim land rights. Simultaneously, they are engaging with the local forest and panchayat officials to uphold their right to traditional rights under the Forests Rights Act, 2006.

An added advantage for them has been the presence of Rajesh K. C. as the panchayat development officer in charge of the area. Before he joined the local government, Rajesh was an active member of the Federation's campaign for land rights. Now part of the administration, he not only pushes for land allotment for his fellow Koragas but also advises the community about the procedures to follow. Moreover, he was able to facilitate ration and Antodaya cards for them, he said.

A big accomplishment for these women has been winning the support of an independent member of the legislative assembly hailing from that area and getting him to

lobby in their favour. This is an indication that the women groups are not only aware of their rights but have also learnt how to claim them.

Building a Better Future

The conscious efforts to see that children are not overlooked and that their rights – especially to physical well-being, nutrition, health, dignity, education and participation – are protected, are being carried forward by 16 children’s committees, each comprising 50 children. These children’s committees keep a sharp eye on dropouts and hold monthly meetings to discuss issues that are important to them. According to the Federation, all children have been enrolled in schools. Keeping them in school has been not easy. Attempts to boost retention have been made by holding interactions between the teachers and the community and organizing tuition facilities for the children.

Helping the Federation to inspire students are Sabitha Koraga and Dinakar Kenjur, whose academic achievements have made them role models for the community. Both persevered with their studies despite economic and social obstacles to reach the pinnacle. By becoming the first person from the community to clear the National Eligibility Test (NET), Sabitha created history in 2010. She followed it up in 2011 by passing the state eligibility test conducted by Mysore University at the first attempt. Sabitha is the first Koraga to be appointed associate professor at the University. Both Sabitha and Dinakar Kenjur, the second Koraga to clear NET, have acknowledged that had they not been supported by the Federation to pursue their education, they might not have been able to fulfill their dreams. Now, they want to give back to the community and lend a hand in motivating Koraga children to continue with their studies.

The biggest achievement has been the government recognition of the Koraga Federation as a rightful organisation representing the community. The Federation was able to influence the ITDP to forward their developmental plan related to infrastructure development, education, health and income generation activities for the community to the central government. The approval of the development plan in the 11th five-year plan of the country was a huge step forward for community participation in governance. The Federation members discuss how the money allotted for community empowerment could be spent. This has led to the allocation of money for de-addiction programmes, rehabilitation, livelihoods, education and health. It is also promoting the resurrection

Building a Better Future



Despite the challenges, the community is determined to get all their children educated. *Above:* In a school in Kinnigoli town, which has around 80 students, eight are from the Koraga community. *Left:* Keerthana and Sharan doing their homework in front of their house in the village of Ramanagara, in Udipi district.



Sabitha Koraga and Dinakar Kenjur both belong to the Koraga community. Today, Sabitha is an assistant professor at Mangalore University and doing a PhD. Dinakar is a guest lecturer in Commerce at Mangalore University.

of the community's cultural identity. Being members of the local district ITDP planning committees, this engagement continues to help link the community with other government schemes.

The Road Ahead

Nevertheless, a long road still lies ahead. The Koragas are on the verge of extinction. Their population has come down from 16,071 in 2001 to 14,794 in 2011, according to the 2013 statistical profile of the scheduled tribes in India. Poverty and alcoholism remains a challenge. Many in the community continue to believe that *ajalu* needs to be practiced despite its abolition. This has created a divide within.

And while women are expressing themselves, there is a need for an increase in their number in all the key decision-making positions in the Federation as well as within the community to change the patriarchal mindsets undermining progressive matrilineal values.

However, there is belief within the community that they can be the change, which gives a sense of hope and a willingness to walk, no matter how long the journey may be. The one rupee that every member of the Federation of Koraga Development Association gives each month to build a corpus fund is a testament to their aspirations for a life of dignity and their determination to claim their rights.

Case Studies





Sabitha Koraga in her office in Mangalore University, Dakshina Kannada district.

Her room in the University of Mangalore is simple. Just like her. The accolades and media attention on becoming the first person from the endangered Koraga tribal community to be appointed assistant professor in the University have not changed Sabitha Koraga. Even the news that a documentary about her achievements had been commissioned by the state government's department for tribal development only brings a shy smile to her face.

It is not hard to understand why this 28-year-old has an old head on her young shoulders. The death of her father when she was only five - years old brought new responsibilities. But helping her mother and looking after her younger brother did not quell her desire to study. She managed to pursue her studies, juggling her time between household tasks and school.

But in 2002, tragedy struck again. Her mother died in an accident and Sabitha had no choice but to drop out of school. Her first priority was to find a job so that she could take care of her younger brother. Around this

time, the Samagra Grameena Ashrama (SGA) was working with the Koraga Federation to identify children from the community who had dropped out of school and persuade them to return to education. During one such meeting with the community in Gundmi village, SGA coordinator Ashok Shetty heard about Sabitha and went to meet her. This meeting was to be a turning point in her life.

“I was in class 10 when my mother passed away. I could not continue my education because I had to look after my brother. I was looking for a way to earn money when I met Ashok. He asked me to work with SGA and help in the campaign to empower the community. He said if I wished to continue with my studies at any point of time, they would support me,” said Sabitha.

For the next 20 months, Sabitha worked with SGA, helping to organize and inform self-help groups of women in the community. However, even during this time, Sabitha yearned to resume her studies.

“When this became known to us, we encouraged her. We had seen her dedication and her desire to study. So we offered all help, including a room in the office to study, and tuition,” informed Ashok Shetty, coordinator, SGA.

In the beginning, Sabitha found it hard to concentrate. But she willed herself to focus and passed school with flying colours, obtaining a first class. Then, there was no looking back.

After graduating from the Besant Women’s College in Mangalore, Sabitha did her post-graduation in sociology from Mangalore University in 2010. Not only did she stand second in the university, she passed the National Eligibility Test (NET) when she was in the third semester of her masters. Conducted by the University Grants Commission for eligibility to appointments as a university lecturer, the NET is considered to be a tough hurdle to cross. But Sabitha showed her academic brilliance by first clearing NET with ease and then the state eligibility test conducted by Mysore University in 2011.

For a short while, Sabitha worked as a guest lecturer at Government First Grade College at Tenkanidiyoor, near Udupi. In December 2013, she was appointed assistant professor in the department of sociology at Mangalore University.

“Education changed my life and I want others from my community to understand its value. It is a power that can change destinies, just as it has mine,” said Sabitha.

Sabitha credits education for helping to overcome the inferiority complex she suffered from belonging to an untouchable community. “I faced discrimination because of my community identity at school. I had to pick up the teacher’s shoes. I was made to stand outside the classroom many times. Many of my classmates were not allowed to sit with the other children and made to sit on the floor. Several schools have earmarked the last bench for Koraga students. But after I worked with SGA and became more aware of my rights, I became confident enough to sit on the first bench when I returned to school,” she recounted.

This was not the only tradition she overturned. She stopped the practice of *ajalu* completely in her village, Gundmi, with the help of the Koraga Federation. But the stigma is yet to end. “I still remember the humiliation while accompanying my mother to collect food leftovers. So I worked hard to persuade the community in my village to stop the practice. Although they have stopped it, they are still considered untouchables by the upper castes who do not allow them to enter their houses even today,” she said.

Although Sabitha has not been able to change that as yet, she is trying to change the mindsets of children from the community not to allow discrimination to force them to drop out of school. She gives motivational talks and guides them.

Sabitha is keen to influence state policies to improve the prospects of the community and is completing her doctoral thesis on the evaluation of policies and programmes in tribal development. “I want my research to further women’s empowerment in the Koraga community,” she said.

Happy Playing 'Second' Fiddle



Dinakar Kenjur is a guest lecturer in the Department of Commerce at the Mangalore University and editor of *Namma Dani* (Our Voice), the newsletter of the Federation of Koraga Development Associations.

Dinakar Kenjur is the second person from the Koraga community to clear the National Eligibility Test (NET). Dinakar is working as guest faculty in the department of commerce at the Mangalore University. Dinakar too overcame several hurdles, including physical disability and caste discrimination, to reach this position. His left leg is affected by a polio infection he had as a child.

Dinakar lost his mother when he was just three years old. But his father, an agricultural labourer, did not stop his education. It was his keenness that pushed Dinakar to complete his school education. The Federation of Koraga Development Associations also played a key role in helping him to pursue higher education. Dinakar's hard work and determination led him to acquire a master's degree in commerce and social work from Mangalore University. He also completed an MPhil and an MBA, adding to his array of academic accomplishments. After working for the disabled community for some years,

Dinakar turned towards research and teaching. He was able to clear the NET and began teaching at Mangalore University.

In 2010, he became the editor of Namma Dani (Our Voice), the Federation's newsletter, produced and written by community. The newsletter, which reaches out to all districts where the Federation works, sensitizes the community about the need to claim their rights. It also recognizes the talent among the youth and links them with support systems.

"I am trying to motivate the children and youth of our community to shed their inferiority complex and tap their potential. I, too, practiced *qjalu* and went to beat drums. But I understood it was wrong when the Federation explained how it had contributed to our oppression. Education helped me to regain my confidence," he said.

Education also helped Dinakar find a life partner in Sabitha. They got married on 14th April 2015. A big supporter of his partner, Dinakar said that Sabitha is not only an inspiration for the community but also for him. Together, they are hoping to inspire many more to believe that where there is a will, there is always a way.

Planting Prosperity, Sowing Dignity



Dogu Koraga, who previously worked as a labourer, benefited from a successful land movement and is now producing vegetables on his own land in Neelvara village, Udipi district.

Planted across his one acre of land in Brahmavur village in Udupi district, are Dogu Koraga's most prized possessions – trees! These are 30 coconut trees, 30 banana plants, 30 areca nut trees and over 50 jasmine shrubs. In between the trees and shrubs grow sweet potatoes, brinjal, beans and bitter gourd.

Rain or sunshine, Dogu is up at daybreak, tending to his trees, shrubs and vegetables lovingly. He draws water from the well and waters each plant himself. He creates his own manure. "It is because of these trees that I am self-sufficient today. I am not dependent on anyone, not even my sons," says Dogu proudly.

Although Dogu had always dreamt of cultivating his own land, he became reconciled to tilling somebody else's land to earn a living. In 2003, when the Federation of Koraga Development Associations' movement for lands rights led to allocation of land in Udupi district, Dogu's dreams of becoming a landowner came true. It then it took him a year of hard physical work to

make his piece of land, which was overrun by brambles and weeds, ready for cultivation. Jasmine plants, given by the Federation, were the first to be planted. As the money earned through the sale of the jasmine flowers increased, Dogu planted vegetables, coconut, areca nut and banana.

Dogu is unschooled but has made up for his lack of literacy with hard work and a determination to succeed. It is no wonder that his is considered a model farm and spoken about in glowing terms at community meetings by the Federation.

Ashok Shetty, Coordinator SGA, who saw the land before it was given to Dogu, said that not many of them had thought such transformation was possible. “The credit goes to Dogu. It was not easy to toil on this land without help. Dogu showed it was possible and this is why the Koraga Federation and SGA have tried to get other community members who received land to follow his example. But we have not been able to scale up the model farm yet,” informed Shetty.

Even Dogu is keen for others in the community to become economically independent by cultivating their land. “It is much better to work on your land than work as a headloader or a daily-wage labourer. This gives you the opportunity to become your own master,” he stated.

Although Koragas are not traditional agriculturists, Dogu grabbed the chance to become the master of his own destiny once he received land. His single-minded dedication led him to live away from his family for some years. Only recently did one of his three sons come to stay with him.

So involved is Dogu in improving his produce that the only programme he watches on the black and white television brought by his son is related to agriculture. “This farm has given me so much. I may not have any savings, but I also don’t have any debts. I am happy and live a life of dignity,” he stated.



Sushila Nada is the former president of the Koraga Abhivridhi Sanghagala Okkoota Karnataka-Kerala (Kannada translation of Federation of Koraga Development Associations Karnataka-Kerala). Ramanagara village, Udupi district.

Everyone knows Sushila Nada. Not just in Nada, her village in Udupi district, but also in all three districts in Karnataka and Kerala where the Federation of Koraga Development Associations Karnataka-Kerala works. It is not just because she happened to hold the position of Federation president for one year, but also because Sushila is a fearless advocate of the Koraga cause, willing to walk the extra mile to help anyone in distress.

Raising her voice against injustice is not new for the 33 year-old Sushila. Drawn to the Federation's struggle for the rights of the Koragas since her school days, Sushila was an active volunteer in their awareness campaign. However, she was unable to join the movement full time having to drop out of school after Class 10 for family reasons and to work as an anganwadi worker.

But even that could not keep her down when she noticed a complete absence of Koraga children in the anganwadi. It took several door-to-door

visits to motivate families to send their children to avail the benefits of the anganwadi.

“It was not easy to convince them to claim their rights. Besides being ignorant of their rights, many were afraid their children would not be allowed to enter the anganwadi. It took time for them to understand the anganwadi was for all children and nobody could stop their entry. They started coming in ones and twos. Finally, now of the 25 children registered in the anganwadi, 10 are from the Koraga community,” said Sushila with pride.

One lesson that Sushila has never forgotten from her days in a missionary school is that discrimination on the basis of colour, caste and community must never be accepted. Not surprisingly, Sushila protested vociferously on an occasion when she was stopped from drawing water from the common well near the anganwadi just because she was a Koraga. “A woman, whose child comes to my anganwadi asked me not to draw water from the well. I told her it was a common well meant for the residents and I had every right to use it. At first, she argued with me, but when she realized that I wasn’t going to give in, she allowed me to use it. Since then, other Koraga women also draw water from this well,” said Sushila.

The inability of most women in the community to be assertive and exercise their franchise or participate in governance was another reason for their oppression and the dominance of money and muscle power, contended Sushila. In 2010, when elections to the local panchayat were announced, Sushila decided to jump into the fray. Pitted against her was another anganwadi worker, backed by the local political party. Seeing her popularity, supporters of her rival threatened her with dire consequences if she did not withdraw her candidature. But the determined Sushila refused. Unfortunately, she lost. “It was frustrating because I knew I had the community support. But I could not counter the money and muscle power. This was my first experience. I hope it will be different the next time,” she said.

When Sushila was elected president of the Federation in 2011 she tried to bring more women into leadership roles. “Women are less articulate. I encouraged them to participate in cultural programmes so that they could become confident at performing in front of crowds. The subjects chosen were related to gender equality, caste discrimination and land and food rights. This also helped to raise awareness on these issues and increase their knowledge,” she pointed out.

As Federation president, she also drew attention to the plight of the community when distribution of land to Koragas under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 and the Land Reforms Act had come to a standstill. She led a month-long march from Shimoga to Bangalore with 1000 protestors demanding their right to land be restored. The march garnered a lot of media attention and led to government authorities restarting the process of allocation of land for the community.

Her feat in completing a post-graduate degree in sociology through the Karnataka State Open University in 2013 – even while pursuing her job as an anganwadi worker – has been inspirational for the community. Four women in her village who had dropped out of school were motivated to again take up education.

Although Sushila continues to participate in various activities organized by the Federation as president of the Koraga Abhivruddhi Sangh of Kundapur taluk in Udupi district, She wants to work to empower women to claim their rights. She is concerned that the traditional matrilineal values of the Koragas are being eroded by patriarchal views, girls are still being married young and dropping out of school and violence against women is on the rise. Sushila has organized rallies on events like Women's Day and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women to sensitize the community. "Women should be respected. Marriage should not be seen as the only goal for them. They should be given equal opportunities to achieve their dreams. Then they can become agents of change," she said.



The Koraga community seeks to reaffirm their culture and identity while looking beyond oppressive practices and seeking sustainable livelihood to build better lives.

Cover Photograph: Young women responding to the question posed: “How many would live in their mother’s house after marriage?” at Ambedkar Bhawan in Adi-Udipi town, Udipi district. The Koraga traditionally are a matrilineal society where kinship is traced through the mother. *Back Cover Photograph:* A hand pruner hanging in Dogu Koraga’s house in Neelavara village, Udipi district. On receiving a plot of land Dogu has become an enthusiastic farmer. © Srikanth Kolari/ActionAid.

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