
A Study on The Situations of Soliga Tribes in Karnataka

Mamatha *1, Dr. Laveena D'Mello 2, Gururaj G. Gowda 3*****

1**II MSW, Srinivas University, Pandeshwar, Mangalore, Karnataka, Email:
mamatha4vr@gmail.com

2**Assistant Professor, College of Social Science and Humanities, Srinivas University,
Mangalore, Email: lavyoronha@gmail.com

3***Research Scholar, Srinivas University, Mangalore, Karnataka, India.
Email: gururajitgi@gmail.com

Abstract

Soliga, also spelled Sholaga and Sh laga, is an ethnic group of India. Its members inhabit the Biligiriranga Hills and associated ranges in southern Karnataka, mostly in the Chamarajanagar and Erode districts of Tamil Nadu. Many are also concentrated in and around the B.R. Hills in Yelandur and Kollegal Taluks of Chamarajanagar District, Karnataka. The Soliga speak Sholaga, which belongs to the Dravidian family. A scheduled tribe, they have a population of around 20,000 individuals. The soliga people of the biligirirangana betta (BR Hills) have captured the imagination of early travellers. Their first mention in written history dates back to the early nineteenth century expeditions to the region sidde gowda, asokliga elder from bedaguli podu, nestled among the moist deciduous forests in the northern parts of BR Hills, recollects an old tale, almost a legend now among the soliga people, the tale of a god-like man wearing bili batte (white clothes; could indicate mordent clothing) who came on a horse followed by several people. Perhaps, this is the only remaining memory among the soliga people of a journey undertaken by a Scottish doctor around 200 years ago. Francis Buchanan left us a journal of his notice from passage through BR Hills in October 1800, perhaps the first ever written record (in English) of the soliga people. Soligas grow ragi and collect and sell non-timber forest produce such as honey and amla for their livelihoods.

Keywords: Soliga tribe, life style, customs and traditions, and socio-cultural situation.

INTRODUCTION

The Soliga tribe traces their origin to Karayya, son of Lord Maleya Mahadeshwara, swamy of Maleya Mahadeshwara Hills, Karnataka. Legend says that on seeing Karayya's affinity towards wild animals, Lord Maleya Mahadeshwara swamy asked Karayya to reside in forests, whereas other fusion son Biliyayya resided in plains and became the forefather of Lingayats. The Soliga speak the Sholaga language (Soliganudi) as a mother tongue. A member of the Dravidian family, it is most closely related to Kannada with several Tamil influences. The Soliga village of Hosapodu in Karnataka, won an important court victory after its entire stock of honey its key source of livelihood was seized by local forestry officials in May. The community, with the support of local organizations, took the matter to court and won. The confiscation of honey was in direct violation of the 2006 Indian Forest Rights Act, which recognizes the rights of India's tribal peoples, such as the Soliga, to live in and from their forests, and protect and manage their land.

In 1974 members of the Soliga tribe were evicted from their homes in the Biligirirangan Hills Reserve, when their sanctuary was re-classified as a tiger reserve in order to 'protect' 30 of the big cats. More than 30 years later Soliga tribe made history in 2011 when their rights to their forests, inside the tiger reserve, were recognized. Under the Forest Rights Act, the Soliga now have legal rights to use and protect as much as 60 per cent of the reserve, including parts of the core area. The Soligas are now working on a proposal to manage the tiger reserve jointly with the Karnataka state authorities, using their traditional knowledge. Despite severe constraints from forestry officials, the Soliga remain determined to manage, harvest and protect their forests sustainably for current and future generations. People living in the forests are blessed with nature's bounties. They never overdraw the forest resources. They replenish what they remove and they pray, ask for permission from the tree gods and goddesses. The Soligas have a knack of identifying what might become scarce so they use that judiciously and plant that crop that year so that the following year, it is available.

The hills are famous for the temple of Lord Ranganatha or Lord Venkatesha, which is situated on the highest peak of the hill range, on the 'white cliff' which gives the hill its name. The local form of the deity is called Biligiriranga. The MM (Male Mahadeshwara) Hills houses an ancient Sri Male Mahadeshwara temple. The folk songs invariably revere the BR Hills deity and the deity at MM Hills for blessing them with abundant verdure. They feel privileged that both Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva are there to protect them. Soligas have named individual portions of the forest and have tremendous knowledge about the landscape. The native wisdom of this fascinating forest dwelling community is documented by a Tree. The content look on the face of any Soliga you meet, their songs that exude love and reverence for the land, the creator, and his creations, make you wonder what it that you lack is. When you observe their way of life, you

realize that their contentment stems from the deep connect that Soligas share with nature. The Soligas bathe in the river stream, pluck flowers from trees, and place them reverentially in front of the gods in the shrine. I was told that a 2000 year old *Michelia champaca* known as “Doddasampige” is the holiest tree for all for the Soliga tribes and other local people. The tree is treated as Lord Mahadeva, having a braid, with the tribes performing traditional dances around the tree on the eve of the “Mahashivarathri” festival. The tree bears flowers of both orange and yellow colours during April. On the East side of the platform there are more than 100 lingams, which are worshipped. This champaka tree, symbolizes the tribal relation with nature! There are around 400 sacred places in 540 square kilometres of this forest, and scientists from ATREE have mapped all of them. It is unfortunate that the younger generation (among the Soligas) are being lured by urban lifestyle. If only they experience the emptiness that their fellow men experience in concrete jungles, perhaps they may rethink, appreciate, and embrace the Soliga way of life.

CULTURE AND TRADITIONS OF SHOLIGA TRIBES

Languages: The Soliga speak the Sholaga language (Soliganudi) as a mother tongue. A member of the Dravidian family, it is most closely related to Kannada with several Tamil influences.

Occupation & Social Status: The Soliga used to practice shifting cultivation, but have more or less given up this practice now. They grow Ragi (Finger millet, *Eleusine coracana*) for subsistence. Their main source of income is harvesting and sale of Non-timber Forest Produce (NTFP) like honey, nellikai (gooseberry, *Emblica officinalis*), bamboo, *Paasi* (Lichen), algae, wild turmeric, Indian blackberry, soapnut and nennari (wild root). They also make baskets using bamboo. They are increasingly being brought to the "mainstream" with active Government and NGO initiative. Many have been given lands closer to 'civilised areas' and most of the forest-dwelling population have been brought together into clusters called *Podus*. Most of the forest area they stay comes under wild life protection area. The Biligiriranga Hills is a Wildlife Sanctuary under Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, the Malai Mahadeswara Hills is a Reserve Forest, and Bandipur is a National Park. Their rights on harvesting NTFP is being sought to be withdrawn citing conservation concerns, sparking a debate about the rights of indigenous people.

Sub Groups of Soligas: There are five sub groups of Soligas; Male Soliga: Kannada speakers residing in Karnataka; Urali Soliga: Kannada and Tamil speakers, residing in border areas of Tamil Nadu; Pujari group: reside in Maleya Mahadeswara Hills; Kadu Soliga: reside near Bandipur Forest; Burude Soliga: reside in Heggadadevanakote Taluk and Kodagu.

Religion: Soliga people follow naturism and animism along with following Hindu practices and their main deities are Madeshwara, Rangaswamy of Biligirirangana Hills, Karayya, Kyate Devaru and Jadeswamy. Other deities worshipped by them include Madeshwara, Basaveshwara and Nanjundeshwara and Sri Alamelu Ranganayaki smetha Sri ranganatha.

RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE

The Soligas are nomadic people who have lived in the Biligiriranga Hills region of Southern Karnataka. Soligas - whose name means Children of the Bamboo live off forest produce like honey, berries and timber. They do cultivate a little bit of pigeon peas, beans, pumpkins and millet but mostly for their own consumption. Many Soligas, even today, live in small shelters called pudus deep inside the dense forests of Southern Western Ghats. The community is so dependent on biodiversity that they revere Mother Nature not just the forests, the animals and the trees, but even the land they walk upon. The knowledge that Soligas possess about the forests of the Western Ghats can be used for biodiversity conservation. Generally, forest fires would be extinguished by the forest department using modern fire-suppression regimes. However, the Soligas claimed that natural fires are inherent part of the forest biome and extinguishing such fires leads to increased parasitic load. The above study looked at infections of Loranthus a plant parasite on Phyllanthus emblica (Aamla) trees and found that fire indeed reduced the parasitic load on these trees and increased their survival. This example points to the importance of considering local, folk knowledge in any biodiversity conservation regime.

The Soliga culture, in recent times, has been severely affected by habitat degradation of the Western Ghats, change in economic practices in neighboring areas and ironically, because of the government declaring their home as a wildlife sanctuary. Collection of non timber forest produce has been banned by the Wildlife Protection Act since 2006. Rains are irregular and delayed, leading to a drop in the small agricultural productivity of the Soligas. Almost 2,00,000 of India's villages are located near forests and depend on forest produce for their day-to-day sustenance. The plight of the Soligas reflects the plight of these communities all over India. Organizations like ATREE, the Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra (VGKK), the Soliga Abhivrudhi Sangha and the Karnataka Forest Department have played a significant role in livelihood enhancement of the Soligas and in rendering their help in biodiversity conservation in the Western Ghats.

SOLIGA TRIBE'S AND THE FOREST RIGHTS

A village belonging to the Soliga tribe in southern India has won an important court victory after its entire stock of honey its key source of livelihood was seized by local forestry officials in May. The community, with the support of local organizations, took the matter to court and won. The confiscation of honey was in direct violation of the 2006 Indian Forest Rights Act, which

recognizes the rights of India's tribal peoples, such as the Soliga, to live in and from their forests, and protect and manage their land. Tribal peoples like the Soliga have been living with and protecting the wildlife in their forests for countless generations. However many forestry officials still believe that forest and tiger conservation requires the removal of all people from the forests. These prejudices often make foresters unwilling to respect tribal rights especially the right to make a livelihood from the forest. The recent court victory exposes this injustice and the necessity for the rights of India's tribes to be respected. The Soliga tribe of Karnataka made history in 2011 when their rights to their forests were recognized, even though they lie inside a tiger reserve. The community has been caring for the forest and harvesting its produce including honey for countless generations. After their rights were recognized one village established a collective to get a fair price for their honey. More Soliga villages are awaiting the recognition of their forest rights and local organizations Keystone, Atree and the Soliga Abhivridhi Sangha (Soliga Peoples' Collective) are supporting them in the process. Despite severe constraints from forestry officials, the Soliga remain determined to manage, harvest and protect their forests sustainably for current and future generations.

SOLIGA TRIBE'S AND TIGER PROTECTION

Proving yet again that tribal people are the best conservationists and guardians of wildlife, the tiger population has doubled in the BRT Tiger Reserve in Karnataka, the only sanctuary in India where they are allowed to live alongside the big cats even in the core area. Survival International, the global movement for tribal people's rights, reported that the tiger population has increased rapidly, almost doubled from 35 to 68 between 2010 and 2014 in the reserve, where local Soliga tribe has won its right to stay. This increase is far higher than the national rate at which the tiger population is growing. The new data and the related information, which the Indian National Tiger Conservation Authority allegedly tried to suppress, discredits government policy to remove the many tribes whose lands have been turned into tiger reserves, the global organisation asserts. The Soligas have a highly developed relationship with their natural environment, and venerate the tiger. Madegowda, a Soliga man, said, "We worship tigers as gods. There hasn't been a single incident of conflict between Soligas and tigers or hunting here."

Across India, tribal communities are being evicted from their ancestral lands in the name of tiger conservation. In 2014, hundreds of Baiga tribal people were evicted from Kanha Tiger Reserve home of Rudyard Kipling's 'Jungle Book' while over a hundred thousand tourists are welcomed into the reserve every year. Buoyed by the increased tiger population in BRT, Survival International has called for a new conservation model that respects tribal peoples' rights and uses their expertise to protect and enhance ecological diversity. Survival's director Stephen Corry said, "These figures expose government policy to remove tribal people from reserves as not only immoral but also counterproductive. Tigers tend to do well when tribal communities remain they

have, after all, lived together for generations. But unlike tribal people, the thousands of tourists who drive in every day bring in a huge amount of money to the conservation industry. They also, of course, get the tigers used to close human presence something poachers find useful.”

The best way to save the tiger is to leave the tribal people who have protected their forests alone. Survival will continue to fight and expose the forced evictions that the conservation industry has tried hard to keep hidden, he added. Though Soligas have been living with and protecting the wildlife in their forests for countless generations, many forestry officials still believe that forest and tiger conservation requires the removal of all people from the forests. These prejudices often make foresters unwilling to respect tribal rights — especially the right to make a livelihood from the forest. Fortunately for Soligas, a local court has upheld their right even though they lie inside the tiger reserve. The court victory exposes this injustice and the necessity for the rights of India’s tribes to be respected, asserts the global organisation which has been helping tribal people defend their lives, protect their lands and determine their own future.

A MARRIAGE OF DIFFERENCE PRACTICED AMONG SOLIGAS

Usually arranged marriages are carried out like a business, looking after the job, earnings, assets and debts of a groom and later girls are got married.

- Ø Boys work in grooms house for five to 12 years to win hearts of parents
- Ø Soligas ascertain either the boy is eligible to hold their daughter's hand
- Ø The dowry system is absent among the Soligas

Whereas, a unique tradition 'Marriage by Service', followed by tribal community 'Soligas' who live deep inside the forest, seems to be more 'cultured' when it comes to marrying off their daughters. Under this customs in practice the boy has to stay in the girl's family and work for a minimum of five years, which can sometimes even extend up to 12 years. Only after the girl's parents are satisfied that the boy can look after their daughter properly they give consent for him to tie the nuptial knot.

During the years, parents observe his work attitude, patience, behaviors including caring and affection towards others while evaluating him during his stay. The parents agree for the marriage, only if he is successful in the entire test and wins their confidence. This is a technique to test the prospective groom to ascertain if he is eligible to hold their daughter's hand. For instance if a boy wants to marry a girl, he wants to work in the girls house for minimum five years and complete all the tasks assigned by family members. The boys in the age group of 14 to 25 years render service for minimum of five years. In case, if the parents are not convinced during the period, the boy has to continue work and win the hearts of the elders within 12 years. This is the custom being practiced in their community, and even today about 10 to 15 per cent of 'Marriage by Service' is taking place in the community, says heads of the community.

Love marriage or elopement marriage' and 'Marriage by Services' is most practiced among the community tribes, out of four types of marriages practiced. The dowry system is absent among the Soligas; only 'Tera' (Process of Agreement) is conducted,' he adds.

Informing about the marriage ritual, he said: 'The marriage ritual is very simple where betel leaves and Tera (Process of Agreement) is exchanged between parents. This ceremony is witnessed by the local elder or the Yajamana along with four other Nyaya panchayathi or tribal council members in the presence of five members of the clan. They exchange betel leaves and pay Rs 12.25 for the other family and also for the Clan. A small marriage feast is organised for the members of the tribal council, while sometimes for all the people of the hamlet.'

CONCLUSION

Soliga tribe is one of the richest tribal communities in India having variety of cultural and traditional practices. People of this community are getting educated and adopting modern life style. Younger generation of this tribal community is slowly getting migrated to the urban areas for the jobs. The importance given by the Karnataka government to develop and bring this tribal community to the social identity is making them get vast number of opportunity to develop. They are economically getting strengthened and less people of these tribes are still depending on their traditional agriculture work. Some more programs on socio economic development of the Soliga tribe are important to be initiated. People of the Soliga tribe must be identified with their traditional and cultural practices. Their contribution towards forest and in protection of Tiger must be identified and encouraged.

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