

Tribal Women Spearhead Return of Matrilineal Values

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Considered untouchables, the Koragas, the most backward of all tribal groups in southern Indian state of Karnataka, faced considerable social and economic deprivations. Ousted from the forest lands their ancestors had occupied for generations, the primitive 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. In 1986, four years after their population dropped to 15,146, the government notified the Koragas as a particularly vulnerable tribal group, thus making them eligible for special benefits.

Efforts to help the Koragas overcome socio-cultural oppression and live a life of dignity have been made by NGOs and the government. But it has been the Koraga women who have risen to the challenge. Not only have they been in forefront of the Koraga struggle for their right to land and livelihoods, and assertion of their cultural identity, but they are also spearheading the return of the progressive values in their matrilineal system.

One such woman is Gowri Kenjur, who first became general secretary of the Koraga Federation, a registered body representing the community, for a period of two years and then in 2006, was elected as its first woman president. "This was a big moment for me as well as for all the Koraga women. It was 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. Although she is no longer the president, she remains a vocal campaigner and is an important leader.

As president, Gowri pushed for greater participation of women from the community and encouraged them to stand up for their rights. Training by local NGOs boosted the confidence of women and form self-help groups (SHGs) to take control over their resources.

Once they became aware of their rights, over 42 women SHG members staged a sit-in protest until the heads of the local government agreed to develop an action plan in accordance to the suggestions given by the women with respect to education and drinking water for children.

They are also reviving the traditional matrilineal values that empowered women. The Koragas have much to be proud of said Shashikala, a leader of a Koraga women's group. She said that unlike in other parts of India where girls are killed before birth because of son preference, the birth of a girl child among Koragas is celebrated. There is no system of dowry either. Importantly, there is no word to describe a woman on the death of her husband, thus eliminating the stigma widows in a patriarchal system undergo.

The empowered Koraga women are also showing the way by breaking traditional societal norms. While Manjula left her violent husband after nine years of marriage and remarried, Sushila called off her engagement because she wanted to study. At the time of her engagement she was studying in class 8. The first girl in her village to acquire a post graduation degree, Sushila is a role model

for many other girls in the community. “I am still single and happy. In our matrilineal society, women have the freedom of choice in all matters and we have to reinforce it”, she said.

Having dropped out after class 8 for marriage, Mamta is keen all her three children get the opportunity to study as much as possible. Mamta uses her income from selling costume jewellery she makes to further the education of her children. Marriage can wait, she said.

Being partially educated, Mamta knows her rights and entitlements. She has ensured that her four year old daughter accesses this entitlement by registering at the nearby children’s center run by the government for the 0-6 age group. These centers provide supplementary nutrition, non-formal pre-school education, nutrition and health education, immunization and, health check-ups. Mamta’s daughter is the only Koraga child in that center; the others belong to castes higher than the Koragas. But she faces none of the discrimination her mother faced when she went to school thanks to the enabling environment created by Mamta and other women of the Koraga community.



Koraga Children in Government Center