

## The Halakki people of Uttara Kannada district (Karnataka)

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Traveling along the National Highway 17 that runs along the west coast of *Uttara Kannada* district of Karnataka, sandwiched between the Arabian sea on one side and forest covered hills on the other, the continuity is broken every now and then by small and large coastal towns. As I made my way from one coastal town to another the sights I encountered could be best described as an amalgamation of natural geographic features like the vast ocean, mighty perennial rivers, evergreen forests, etc., with products of developmental activities such as hydel projects, a naval base, four lane highways, among others. Another observation I made was that such an assortment doesn't seem to be restricted to the landscape alone but is evident of the human inhabitants of the region. The district is home to many indigenous tribal communities among others, including the *Sidhis*, *Goulis*, *Kunabis*, *Gondas* and the community I sought- the *Halakkis*.

The *Halakki* people are scattered across several Taluks of *Uttara Kannada* district namely Karwar, Ankola, Kumta, Gokarna and Honnavar. Their villages are mostly located on either side of the National Highway 17 that cuts through the aforementioned places and also on strips of land adjacent to the waters of the Arabian Sea. *Halakki* women clad in bright traditional wear adorned with beaded necklaces, with a head load of firewood or basket in hand is not an uncommon sight along the highway.



Earlier the *Halakkis* resided at the foothills of the Western Ghats and were known to practice a system of agriculture similar to that of the *Thodas* of the Nilgiris. They also depended on forest produce and were known to hunt. When a ban was imposed on hunting and their traditional system of agriculture they began migrating to the flatlands,

seashores and riversides. At present agriculture is still the predominant occupation. While some of them own land others work under landlords. Another means of livelihood includes firewood gathering (though most often the gathered wood is meant for household purposes). With increasing tourism in some of the areas especially Gokarna, new & alternative means of income generation are available at present. A couple of such instances that I came across during my recent visit to Gokarna were, *Halakki* women by the entrance of the Mahableshwar Temple in Gokarna selling flowers and other *puja* offerings to eager tourists and *Halakki* families running beachside shacks that offer continental and Indian menus apart from accommodation to international and local tourists.



Despite exposure to people from the world over some characteristics of their traditional ways are still evident. A striking example being my observations of *Halakki* men and women at some of the beachside shacks serving a variety of Italian, Israeli, north Indian dishes to famished tourists but at mealtime devouring staple traditional foods such as fish, *ambli* (rice porridge), pickle, etc..

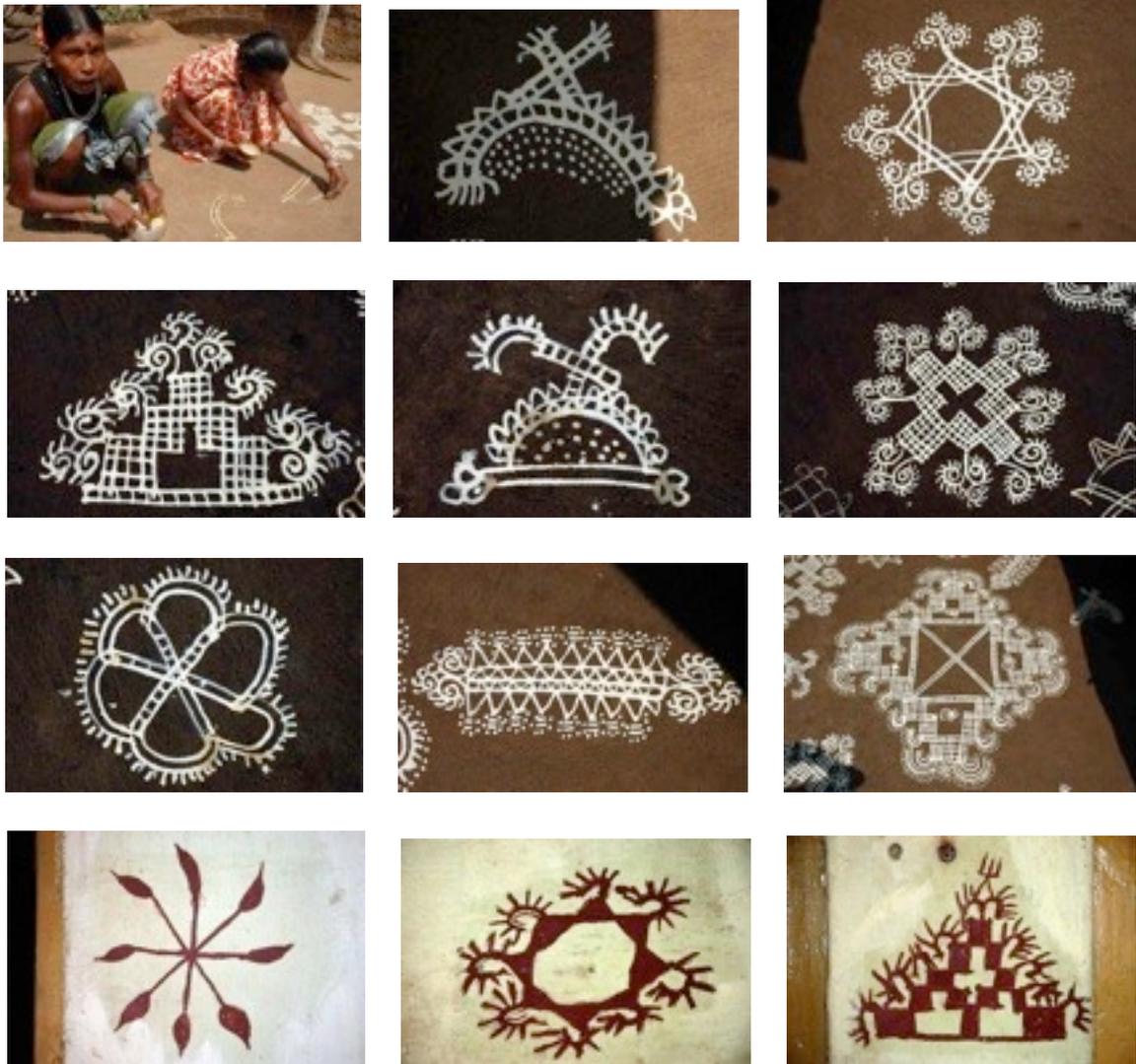
Dressing, especially so in case of the women is another example I observed. Despite their contact with the mainstream world both in terms of people and access to television and other media, I saw *Halakki* women more often than not in traditional attires. This chiefly comprises bright coloured *sarees* wrapped in a special way (apparently 8 different styles

exist changing with geographic location) and worn without a blouse leaving the back exposed. Their necks are adorned with numerous necklaces of black, yellow and blue beads, while glass and metal bangles adorn their hands. However widowed members do not wear the beaded necklaces. The hair is well oiled and neatly combed back and rolled into a bun and decorated with flowers like that of the palm tree, jasmine, etc. The traditional attire of men is simple and comprises of only a langoti which essentially is a loin-cloth. During my visit I only observed some of the older men dressed this way while the middle aged men and youngsters have taken to wearing shirts and pants much like city folk.



The Halakki language is a dialect of the state language Kannada and is known as '*Halakki Kannada*'. A typical *Halakki* home known as '*Hullu mane*' in the local dialect comprises a thatched hut with mud walls (now most often replaced by concrete structures) decorated elaborately with *Hali / Seedi* which are traditional white drawings made from *Hali* (white mud abundantly available in this area) mixed with water and painted against a dark background. However in recent times variations in *Hali / seedi* are seen, the difference being a dark drawing against a light background, the dark colour made from a mixture of

*Seedi* (white mud), powdered tiles, jasmine leaves and turmeric. Different *Hali / Seedi* are drawn on different occasions like weddings, ear piercing ceremony of a child, naming ceremony of a child, first haircut ceremony of a child, etc. In essence the *Hali / Seedi* is considered as a diagrammatic representation of the event.



During each and every Halakki wedding which traditionally are held at home a new *Hali* is drawn. The drawing is drawn on the wall under which the bride and groom are made to sit with their backs facing it. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> image below, the bottom left portion of the diagram within the red square is a pictorial representation of the head gear the groom wears and during the marriage ceremony he is made to sit under it. Similarly the bottom right portion of the image is a pictorial representation of the head gear the bride wears and she is made to sit under it during the ceremony.



Below is an example of a Hali drawn during the harvest festival of Ugadi. The crop from the first harvest is tied to the doorway with the *Seedi / hali* drawn around it.



Similar drawings decorate doors of the thatched huts and are believed to ward off evil.



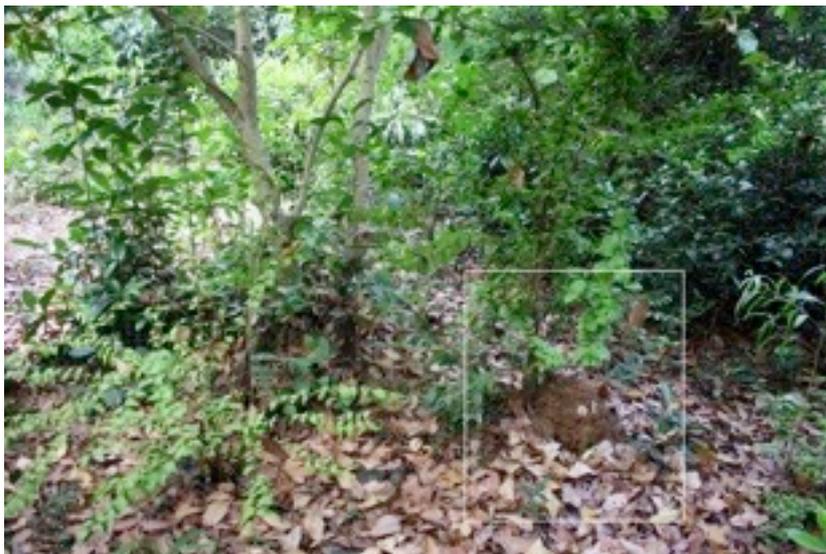
Apart from *Hali/ Seedi* another typical feature of a *Halakki* home is a small temple of the Lord Venkatesha built on the left side of the house. Lord Venkatesha is an important god for the *Halakki* people and is referred to as their *Kula Devaru* (*Kula* refers to a group of people and *Devaru* refers to god). Only men who have visited the Lord Venkateshwara temple at Tirumala, Thirupathi located in the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh and bring back an idol from there are allowed to build the temple. If not the home would have a *Tulsi* (holy basil) plant which is prayed to and known as '*Tulsi Devaru*'.



It is believed that every *Kula* or community has a *Kari Devaru* and he resides in a specific place within each village.



At one place shown to me in *Kutle* village, *Gokarna*, which has about 15 *Halakki* houses, it is believed that their *Kari Devaru* resides in an ant hill shown within the white square in the image below. Apparently the ant hill was much bigger but over the years has broken down to the current size. The entire community has always believed that their God has been residing in the same place. Due to insufficient money they have not been able to build a *Kari Devaru* Temple like the one shown in the above image. During important festivals like *Suggi* the whole village gathers at this place of worship.



The *Halakki* calendar is dotted with a number of festivals and prayer ceremonies throughout the year each of which have distinct reasons and purposes. The main ones include *Shankranthi* (January), *Shivarathri* (March), *Ugadi* (April), *Suggi Habba* (May), *Yekadasi* (June), *Nag Panchami* (August), *Nulu Hunume* (August), *Shravana Sanivara* (September), *Deepavali* (October), *Go Pooje* (October) and *Tulasi habba* (November). While many of these are common to most other tribal and non tribal communities in India, at least one is unique to the *Halakki* people. The *Suggi Habba* is the biggest, grandest and most expensive festival of the *Halakkis* celebrated with great gusto. From literature I learnt that this festival celebrates the harvest season but during my personal visits I was

informed that *Suggi* is celebrated to please the 'Kari Devaru' so that all evil is warded off and the community is blessed.

During these festivals one also gets a glimpse of traditional musical instruments, song and dance in which both women and men participate. An example includes, *Suggi Kunita* a special dance performed by men during the *Suggi Habba* where men dressed in traditional clothes meant for the occasion and with large decorative pieces secured to their heads dance in celebration of the harvest season. The dancers thank the Lord and seek his protection for the bounty and for ensuring prosperity for all. During the *Suggi Habba* women sing songs while men play the *Thamte* all night. The *Thamte* is a musical instrument played only by men, which is made of mud container tightly covered with the skin of the monitor lizard on one end and open at the smaller end. Another dance we can witness during this festival is the *Chole atta* (a dance performed with sticks).



Apart from the festivals mentioned above several other occasions are celebrated with much the same enthusiasm. During my visit I was lucky enough to attend one such occasion, the naming ceremony of a seven day old baby. The ceremony started with lighting the lamp and a small prayer at the worship place out side the house.



A coconut which is an offering from the father's family is placed in the cradle first and decorated with little flowers and Kumkum (powder used for social and religious markings in Hinduism). A minimum of five people then take turns to rock the cradle. When enquired later about this practice back in my home town, I was told that it is a common practice among a lot of communities with the differences between communities being minor. For instance I found out that during my naming ceremony a stone was first placed in the cradle and rocked a few times. There is a good possibility that this practice was also to ensure that the cradle was built strong enough before actually laying the baby there. In most cases the coconut or the stone like in my case would be about the same size of the baby and would weigh much more than the baby.



Following the rocking of the cradle, the older woman of the household also the most experienced rubs oil on the infant's body. The infants face is then marked with a dot using Kajol (a common eye cosmetic used in India), the purpose behind this being to ward off evil and keep bad vibes away. The baby is then dressed in brand new clothes and bejewelled with a thin gold chain. Finally the coconut in the cradle is removed and the infant is placed in it. The parents are made to sit beside the baby and the father alone gets to decide the baby's name. This is followed by a small ceremony where all the members of the house and the guests bless the couple by rubbing rice mixed with water and turmeric on their foreheads.



I was told that traditionally women would sing on such occasions but the newer generation does not seem to follow that anymore. Finally as an offering to the couple beetle leaf with beetle nut is given and the function ends with a lavish meal.

From my visit and interactions with the *Halakkis* I gathered that their rich culture is mirrored in many aspects of their life including food, religious ceremonies and customs, song, dance, etc.. However, with the advent of modernity and exposure to a variety of other cultures, access to television and other media, access to education and many more unconventional employment opportunities, changes with respect to way of life, traditional practices, are most often inevitable. For example I noted that songs, which used to be a major part of their culture, are vanishing slowly with fewer people having knowledge of them. Same is the case with musical instruments, as there are fewer people who make traditional musical instruments and even fewer people who know how to play the instruments.



Even while collecting information on traditional practices and religious ceremonies, it was the members of the older generation who were able to help with necessary information to a large extent.