

CONCERNS IN TYPOGRAPHY & CULTURE:

A case-study based on the Kotas of the Nilgiris

INTRODUCTION

Enveloped in urban settings with languages and literacy being easily available to us, it is difficult for us to imagine that there do exist people, cultures and communities, who are still trying to figure ways of creating visual expressions to their verbal language! This paper introduces us to a script which was born in 2010 in the Nilgherries-The Kota script.

In the middle of the vast Indian sub-continent amidst the glorious serenity of the south, lies the land of forgotten tribes who have made the high hills their abode since the past thousands of years. The convergence of the Western and Eastern *ghats* in an area which has been christened by the British as ‘Neilgherry’ provides these native tribes a home for their kind to flourish and prosper with all that the Nilgiri has to offer. These hills are the abode of some communities which live in perfect harmony with nature. But now, due to external factors such as globalization and urbanization they find themselves resisting the pressures of the outside world and are trying to preserve their ancient culture so that it does not fade with the onslaught of time.

The CONTEXT of CULTURE

Anthropologists conceived the modern concept of culture toward the end of the 19th century. The first really clear and comprehensive definition came from the British anthropologist Sir Edward Tylor. Writing in 1871, he defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor 1871/1958,p.1). Since Tylor’s time, definitions of culture have proliferated, so that by the early 1950s, North American anthropologists A.L.Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn were able to collect over a hundred of them from the academic literature. Recent definitions tend to distinguish more clearly between actual behavior and the abstract ideas, values and perceptions of the world that inform that behavior. To put it in another way, culture goes deeper than observable behavior; it is a society’s shared and socially transmitted ideas, values and perceptions which are used to make sense of experience and generate behavior and are reflected in behavior (Haviland,et al 2008).

GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION

‘The Nilgiris’ or the Nilgiri hills is one of the smallest districts of Tamil Nadu. The word Nilgiri means ‘blue mountains’. Because of the haze of the clouds and mist which envelopes the range, the name Nilgiri has been given to the land by the people living at the foot of these mountains.

The Nilgiri district is geographically located between 11°N to 12°N and 76°15 E and is a part of the Western Ghat chain of mountains in southern India. The hill has a total area of 2,549 sq.kms, with an average elevation of 6,000 ft. This district shares borders with predominantly three other regions viz. Kerala from the West, Karnataka from the north and by Coimbatore towards the south east.

PTGs - INHABITANTS OF THE NILGIRIS

Currently there are four indigenous tribes in the Nilgiri region. The ‘Kotas’ who are artisans. The ‘Todas’ who are a pastoral community and also known as ‘the Lords of the Soil’. The ‘Badagas’ are farmers and cultivators who live an agrarian life while the ‘Kurumbas’ are hunters who live a nomadic life. The traditional role of these communities has brought them into a healthy symbiotic relationship with each other and helped maintain equilibrium within the blue mountains of the south.

The Central Government has identified the Kotas as one of the seventy five primitive tribal groups in India. The rationale behind the identification of being termed as ‘rural’ or ‘primitive’ is due to:

1. Pre-agricultural level of technology
2. Stagnant population
3. Extremely low literacy rate
4. Subsistence level of economy

WHY the KOTAS?

It was in the month of May during the year 2010, that the researcher received the first Kota dictionary from the senior most Kota priest Guru Kanagraj ji . The other three

communities do not have a script yet. Besides insights into the Kota culture, this paper introduces the Kota script and presents the influences it has drawn from the Tamil script.

The researcher was keen on exploring the lesser known tribes and their life-styles, culture, customs and scripts if any. Though the Indian culture is renowned around the world for its elegance and individuality, there has always been a divide when it came to exploring tribes of southern India. These tribes who are now singlehandedly fighting against all odds, in order to sustain their culture. The survival of these tribes is getting tougher as we speak. Hence the need to document their culture and figure out ways and means to help them preserve it. Curiosity was driven by the need to know how during the 21st century, do they maintain their individuality and refuse to succumb to the world around.

THE KOTA TRIBE

The Kotas, a predominant tribe of the Nilgiris are recognized as the neighbor of the Todas, but they are indeed unlike their neighbor and show unique characteristics while maintaining a distinct identity of their own.

The Kota name is derivative from ‘*Ko*’ meaning King. The Kota people believe that their fore-fathers were kings. The place where they have settled is called a ‘*Kokkal*’. The name ‘*kota-giri*’ implies to the ‘mountain of kotas’, this significance was given by the people during the time of the British rule in India. Their name ‘Kota’ was given by outsiders. They address themselves as *Kov*. The Kotas rely on non-timber forest products for much of their food, gas and medicines. They grow minimal resources for subsisting and cash crops like the marigold flowers, *samai*, *choalm* and *rugi* in their fields. They are agriculturists by occupation. They are known for their isolation and their unwillingness to meet or mix with outsiders. They are currently around 2000, and are fast declining. The Kotas are consanguineous tribes which are related by blood. The act of mating closely related individuals has taken place because of the tribes’ voluntary isolation which has led to their high rate of mortality.

LIVELIHOOD

The Kotas are craftsmen, musicians and drummers and the ones extending these services to other adjoining communities. These Kota tribal communities are experts in art and craftsmanship. This is evident from a numerous art works of terracotta and pottery that they have created with a great deal of skill and expertise. In order to sustain their livelihood, most Kotas have adapted to the cultivation and farming (Reddy and Rao, 2003).

LANGUAGE

The Kotas speak the Kota language or '*Ko-v Ma-nt*', a Dravidian language closely connected to the Todas also which has strong linguistic affiliations with very early Tamil and Malyalam. All Kotas speak Badaga and Tamil as well, as in the past they had to communicate with other people who didn't know their language. They are inclined towards religion and spiritual belief.

LIFE RITUALS

- **Marriage:** Consanguineous (related to blood) marriages are highly favored in this group. The women in Kota tribe only marry their blood relations/ relatives. The wedding is a simple affair, the bridegroom bows to the feet of the bride's father, pays a token fee of four annas and a bride price ranging from ten paise to one hundred rupees. Among the Kotas, however, there is no joint marriage system, nor any desire to limit the number of heirs, nor any particularly potent supervision by parents. (Retrieved from E Scholarship on 2nd May, 2010).

The Kotas of the Nilgiris in South India are not polyandrous. A woman may have one husband but if her husband dies or divorces her then she can get married to his brother or any other man. What Kota polyandry amounts to is that a man's brothers can have free sexual access to his wife, or when a man is ill or incapacitated or in any way incapable to fulfill his husbandly duties, then his brothers take his place. This might sound exploitative but this happens because of less population of women among the community. The brothers, are in effect, secondary husbands. R. Vishwanathan, one of the elders of the Kota tribe, told IANS (Indo-Asian News Service): "Our matrilineal family ethos ensures that

women take all important decisions, including marriage without the interference of priests or politicians. After the bride and groom and the bride meet and agree to marry, an alliance is fixed virtually the next minute”. Immediately the groom’s mother adorns the girl with a white shawl, a deed that completes the betrothal. A few days later, the girl is welcomed into her in-laws’ home with a black-bead garland by the groom’s mother. “A token fee of Rs.1.25 is offered to the eldest man in the family marking the completion of the ceremony”. (Retrieved from Cambridge Journal on 25th April, 2010).

- **Religion:** The Kota has a number of deities, some traditionally their own and some taken from Hindu religion. The Kota believe that their Gods or ‘Somi’ live in heaven or ‘Kalingiri’ which is somewhere in the sky far above the sun. They revere anything associated with the sky such as the sun, moon and stars, which they say, possesses virtues which are otherwise lacking in earthly beings space. Kota people paint their faces in ghost-like blue color to signify the transformation of a boy to a man. They believe that in order to become a man, the child must die. Thus the ghost-like blue paint is an indication to the death of their childhood. In the past they would sacrifice wild animals after the boy’s schooling is completed. Today, gifts of money have taken the place of sacrificing the wild animals.

The Kotas do not consider themselves to be Hindus; however there are various temples in and around the settlements where deities such as Lord Krishna are worshipped. Kotas have regularly supplied pipes, metal and leather goods along with other carpentry products to the other tribes of the region and provide pottery to the Todas and the Badagas. The Kotas are strong passionate people who are proud of their heritage and have an undying love for their community. And even though they are welcoming to the outside world and allow them to catch a glimpse of themselves, they continue to strive to maintain their identity as original inhabitants of the Nilgiris.

All the Kota villages are bound by certain limitations. A particular hair-style and dress code needs to be maintained. The cow is the sacred animal of the Kotas. Their Gods do not have

human manifestation. Lord Aynor which represents fire and Lord Amanor which represents a Bow and Arrow are their main Gods. Their rituals are different from the other tribes.

- **Death:** There are two types of funeral ceremonies that are followed by the Kotas. The first one being the ‘Green Funeral’ in which the corpse is cremated shortly after the death of the person. The second, called ‘Dry Funeral’, which is held once a year (or once in two years) for all the deaths that have occurred since the last Dry Funeral was celebrated. The terms are an analogy to a cut plant. At the first funeral, the loss is green and fresh in the mind; at the second it is dried out. (Retrieved from Cambridge Journal on 25th April, 2010).

The Kotas are indigenous people who amongst all the Indian languages are the only ones with no retro aphasic vowels.

The KOTA SCRIPT

Guru Kanagraj ji the Kota priest has created the first Kota dictionary. He believes that the letter forms are influenced by the Tamil script. Stated below are the Tamil vowels in green and the Kota vowels in red.



Fig.1. Tamil and Kota vowel ‘a’. Kota language first part.p.11.



Fig.2. Tamil and Kota vowel ‘aa’. Kota language first part.p.11.



Fig.3. Tamil and Kota vowel 'e'. Kota language first part.p.11.



Fig.4. Tamil and Kota vowel 'ee'. Kota language first part.p.11.

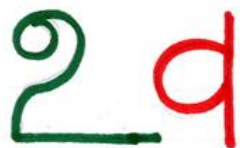


Fig.5. Tamil and Kota vowel 'u'. Kota language first part.p.11.



Fig.6. Tamil and Kota vowel 'uu'. Kota language first part.p.11.



Fig.7. Tamil and Kota vowel 'ay'. Kota language first part.p.11.



Fig.8. *Tamil and Kota vowel 'ayy'. Kota language first part.p.11.*



Fig.9. *Tamil and Kota vowel 'i'. Kota language first part.p.11.*



Fig.10. *Tamil and Kota vowel 'o'. Kota language first part.p.11.*



Fig.11. *Tamil and Kota vowel 'oo'. Kota language first part.p.11.*

உயிர் எழுத்துக்கள்	-	11
மெய் எழுத்துக்கள்	-	21
உயிர்மெய் எழுத்துக்கள்	-	230
மொத்தம்	-	<u>252</u>

Fig.13. Total Kota vowels, consonants and combinations of vowels and consonants.
Kota language first part.p.8.

┌ Ta	-	┌ Da
└	-	└
து Tha	-	து Dha
து	-	து
ப Pa	-	ப Da
ப	-	ப
க Ka	-	க Ga
க	-	க

Fig.14. Tamil and Kota letters 'ta', 'da', 'tha', 'dha', 'pa', 'ba', 'ka', 'ga'. *Kota language first part.p.8.*

	Tamil	
va	வா	
va	வா	- வா come
po	போ	
oak	போ	- போ go
	சாப்பிடு	
	சாப்பிடு	- சாப்பிடு eat
	உண்ண	
	குடி	- குடி drink
	தா	
	தர	- தர give

Fig.15. Tamil and Kota simple words. *Kota language first part.p.26.*

CONCLUSION

In the beginning of the 21st century, when our Indian languages show an influence of the western world at one end, on the other hand we notice a script eager to take its first steps. Clearly evident is the nascent stage of the Kota script. It has yet to develop the fonts that can be printed. All the Kota letters in the dictionary are hand-written alongside the Tamil letters which do have fonts.

As discussed, the most unique factor of this paper is primarily acknowledging the birth of a script in the beginning of the 21st century. The intention of presenting this paper amongst this august audience is to create an awareness of its existence. Also, to take it further and derive means to honor and preserve it.

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