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Heritage and light: Deepavali rituals of the Halakki Vokkaligas

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Abstract

The Halakki Vokkaligas, an indigenous community of the Uttara Kannada region, blend their agrarian lifestyle with their cultural practices, creating a celebration of both material and spiritual prosperity. Deepavali, for them is not merely a festival of lights, but a time to honour family bonds, community values, and the blessings of nature. The rituals surrounding the festival are deeply rooted in the community's ancestral customs, passed down through generations. Qualitative approaches like Knowledge Informants Interview, semi structured interview schedule, Focus Group discussion and Personal observation were used to collect the information regarding customs, traditions, rituals and festival celebrations during Deepavali. Participatory approaches like transect walks, oral histories and participatory photography were employed to explore the information. The Halakki Vokkaliga community, residing predominantly in Uttara Kannada, including Belambra village in Ankola, celebrates Deepavali (Diwali) with unique rituals reflecting their deep connection to nature, agriculture and cultural heritage. The festivities begin with cleansing homes and honoring Goddess Lakshmi during Lakshmi Pooja. Unique customs include the *Hande Pooja*, where a traditional bathtub is adorned with medicinal plants and filled with water infused with turmeric and *gomutra*, emphasizing spiritual and physical purification. Early morning oil baths with turmeric, donning new clothes, and stepping over a *hidle kaayi* at the entrance symbolize renewal and the triumph of positivity. On Balipadyami, *Gopooja* honors cattle through bathing, decoration, and playful community interactions like *Dana Bicchuvudu*. Culinary traditions, including *Kotte Rotti* and *Akki Payasa*, showcase sustainable practices and the use of natural resources. A unique tradition involves sons-in-law and married daughters returning to their maternal homes, being welcomed with *Bagina* offerings, and participating in the evening *deepa noduvudu* ritual, where the oil lamp is worshipped, prayers offered, and family bonds strengthened through shared meals and gratitude, encapsulating the spirit of togetherness and devotion. In an era of rapid modernization, these rituals provide a sense of continuity, nurturing both individual and collective well-being. They offer a moment for introspection, for connecting with loved ones and for reaffirming the values that define the Halakki Vokkaliga way of life.

Keywords: Akki payasa, Deepavali, Halakki vokkaliga, Kotte rotti, Rituals

Introduction

Deepavali, the festival of lights, is a time of joyous celebration, renewal, and reflection for many communities across India. Among them, the Halakki Vokkaligas of Karnataka celebrate this vibrant festival with unique customs that reflect their rich cultural heritage. This article explores the Deepavali rituals of the Halakki Vokkaliga community, highlighting their deep connection to tradition, family, and spirituality. The Halakki Vokkaligas, an indigenous community of the Uttara Kannada region, blend their agrarian lifestyle with their cultural practices, creating a celebration of both material and spiritual prosperity. Deepavali, for them, is not merely a festival of lights, but a time to honour family bonds, community values, and the blessings of nature. The rituals surrounding the festival are deeply rooted in the community's ancestral customs, passed down through generations.

Deepavali tradition is a rich tapestry of rituals that blend regional practices with family-specific customs. The celebrations begin with the customary preparation of the

home—cleaning, decorating with colourful rangolis, and lighting oil lamps to invite prosperity and drive away darkness. The central ritual, however, revolves around the return of daughters to their maternal homes, where they are welcomed with offerings of *Bagina* (Areca nut, Coconut, Betel leaf), new clothes and the sacred light of the oil lamp, known as *deepa noduvudu*. This moment of gathering signifies the importance of familial ties, respect for elders and the continuity of tradition.

The evening ritual includes prayers, offerings of *naivedya* and the lighting of *diyas*, with each light symbolizing the triumph of good over evil. In the Halakki Vokkaliga community, this is a time for reflection on personal growth and gratitude for the past year's blessings. The celebrations culminate with a communal meal, where family members, young and old, partake in the joy of togetherness.

This article delves into these rituals, examining their cultural significance and the way they contribute to the community's sense of identity and continuity. It also explores how these traditions, though evolving in the modern world, remain a

beacon of heritage, offering insight into the values that continue to guide the Halakki Vokkaligas during the festival of Deepavali.

Methodology

The study was conducted during 2024 in Belambar village in Ankola taluk of Uttara Kannada district. Qualitative approaches like Knowledge Informants Interview, semi structured interview schedule, Focus Group discussion and Personal observation were used to collect the information regarding customs, traditions, rituals and festival celebrations during Deepavali. A semi structured interview schedule was used to collect the primary information from the respondents. Participatory approaches like transect walks, oral histories and participatory photography were employed to explore the information and presented as below.



Fig 1: Belambar village in Ankola taluk

Results

The Halakki Vokkaliga community, residing predominantly in Uttara Kannada, including Belambra village in Ankola, celebrates Deepavali (Diwali) with unique rituals reflecting their deep connection to nature, agriculture and cultural heritage. Here are some typical rituals and customs associated with their.

Deepavali celebrations

The festivities begin with meticulous cleaning of homes, symbolizing the removal of negativity and preparation for welcoming prosperity. The rituals of Deepavali emphasize worship and offerings. Goddess Lakshmi, the deity of wealth and prosperity, is worshipped with devotion during Lakshmi Pooja during half-moon day. Families prepare traditional offerings, including fruits, sweets, and special dishes, while praying for abundance and well-being.

Traditional bath-Hande Pooja or Neeru tumbuva habba (ನೀರು ತುಂಬುವ ಹಬ್ಬ)

The traditional Deepavali ritual of the Halakki tribes, which involves the use of the Hande (a traditional bathtub), reflects deep cultural and medicinal practices. The Hande is carefully cleaned and filled with water, with a few drops of gomutra (cow urine), kukum (turmeric), and arshina (a traditional paste), which hold spiritual and purifying significance in the community. The adornment of the Hande with locally available shrubs like *intle kaayi balli* (a type of creeper), *gondi hoovu* (a flower), and *ile patti* (leaves)

emphasizes the deep connection the tribe has with the natural environment. These plants are chosen not only for their aesthetic appeal but also for their cultural and medicinal properties. *Intle kaayi balli* is known for its traditional uses in various rituals, and *gondi hoovu* and *ile patti* are believed to have spiritual or healing significance. This ritual highlights the community's reverence for nature and its role in maintaining physical and spiritual well-being. The following morning, an auspicious ritualistic bath marks the start of the day's celebrations. Early in the morning, before sunrise, family members apply oil infused with turmeric on their bodies. Turmeric, known for its antiseptic and purifying properties, is believed to cleanse the body and soul, signifying a fresh beginning. After the oil bath, people dress in new clothes, signifying renewal, prosperity, and the triumph of good over evil. This moment is particularly joyous, as wearing new attire is symbolic of embracing positive changes and leaving behind negativity. Before entering their homes after the bath, an interesting custom is observed where participants ceremonially step over a *hidle kaayi* (placed at the entrance). This act is steeped in symbolic meaning, as the *hidle kaayi* is believed to absorb negativity and prevent evil from entering the household, ensuring that only positivity accompanies the family as they begin their Deepavali festivities.

This ritual not only emphasizes cleanliness and spiritual purity but also celebrates the community's harmonious relationship with nature and their understanding of its role in everyday life.

Unique rituals during Balipadyami (Gopooja)-Dana Bicchuvudu (ದನ ಬಿಚ್ಚುವುದು)

The rituals of Balipadyami during Deepavali, particularly Gopooja and Dana Bicchuvudu, hold deep cultural and agricultural significance in Karnataka. These practices emphasize gratitude and reverence for cattle, which are pivotal in traditional farming systems.

On this auspicious day cows and bulls, considered sacred and integral to farming, are bathed and adorned with vibrant decorations. Special embellishments like Chowla (a unique decorative design), kumkum, flowers, and garlands are used. Additionally, a coconut and Kotte rotti (a decorative bread-like item) are tied around the cow's neck as offerings.

Dana Bicchuvudu (Snatching of Offerings) In a tradition, villagers gather and try to snatch the coconut and Kotte rotti from the decorated cattle. Those who successfully grab these items are believed to receive divine blessings. This playful yet meaningful act fosters community interaction and highlights the symbolic relationship between humans and their livestock.

Preparation of Special Foods

After completing these rituals women in the houses involved in preparing dishes for the guests. Traditional dishes are prepared using locally available ingredients. Kotte rotti, akki payasa, rice, sambar and non-vegetarian items like chicken curry, mutton curry or fish.

Kotte Rotti and Akki Payasa: Culinary Identities of the Halakki Tribe

The Halakki tribe of Uttara Kannada is known for its rich cultural heritage, which is deeply reflected in its traditional

culinary practices. Two such recipes—

Kotte Rotti and **Akki Payasa**—hold a special place in their food culture.



Kotte rotti (ಕೊಟ್ಟೆ ರೊಟ್ಟಿ)

Kotte Rotti is a traditional rice-based preparation that showcases the tribe's ingenuity and their sustainable use of natural resources. The preparation involves creating a unique mold using jackfruit leaves (*halasina ele*), which are woven together with sticks (*kaddi*) into a distinctive design resembling a small basket.

Once the mold is ready, a thick fermented rice batter made is poured into it. The filled molds are then placed in a steamer and cooked on low steam, allowing the aroma of the jackfruit leaves to infuse into the rice, enhancing its flavor and making it a truly unique dish. The process not only preserves the natural flavor of the ingredients but also demonstrates the Halakki people's skilful use of locally available materials in their cuisine.

Akki Payasa

Another traditional delicacy is Akki Payasa, a sweet dish made from rice. It is a simple yet rich preparation, where rice is cooked in milk, sweetened with jaggery, and flavored with cardamom. Sometimes, garnishes such as roasted cashews and raisins are added to enhance its taste.



Fig 2: Akki Payasa

Cultural Significance

Both Kotte Rotti and Akki Payasa are not merely recipes but are emblematic of the Halakki tribe's identity. These dishes are often prepared during festivals, rituals and communal

gatherings, reflecting the community's close-knit nature and their reliance on traditional methods passed down through generations. These recipes highlight the community's deep respect for nature and their reliance on sustainable practices, making them an integral part of the Halakki tribe's cultural and culinary heritage.



Fig 3: The Halakki tribe's



Fig 4: Recipes highlight

Seeing oil lamp by son in laws-a unique tradition

A traditional Deepavali ritual, highlighting familial and cultural bonds. It reflects a practice where married daughters and their husbands are invited back to the maternal home, reinforcing ties between families.

The ritualistic welcome of the sons-in-law with a *Bagina* offering (a symbolic gift of Arecanut, Coconut, and Betel leaves) and new clothes showcases the respect and hospitality extended to them. Deepavali being a festival of lights, the evening ritual of *deepa noduvudu* (seeing the oil lamp) symbolizes devotion and gratitude. Offering prayers, *naivedya* (food offered to God), and a monetary offering further signify reverence and the wish for prosperity and blessings. This practice not only emphasizes the spiritual aspect of Deepavali but also strengthens familial relationships through shared traditions and rituals. After the prayers and offerings, everyone comes together to share a meal, marking the end of the ritual and the continuation of the festive spirit. This communal aspect adds to the warmth and togetherness of the celebration, strengthening family bonds and ensuring everyone enjoys the festivities.

Conclusion

Halakki Vokkaliga community keeps alive a heritage that bridges the past with the present. The lighting of diyas and

the communal rituals during Deepavali symbolize not only the exultation of light over darkness but also the celebration of culture over time. In an era of rapid modernization, these rituals provide a sense of continuity, nurturing both individual and collective well-being. They offer a moment for introspection, for connecting with loved ones and for reaffirming the values that define the Halakki Vokkaliga way of life.

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