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Halakki Vokkaliga Women as Custodians of Ritual Traditions: An Ethnographic Study in Uttara Kannada, Karnataka

Shilpa R* , Rohini Shivananda** and Soumya Prakash B S***

ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study aims to examine the role of Halakki Vokkaliga women as preservers of ritual traditions and cultural heritage in Ankola Taluk, Uttara Kannada district, Karnataka. The data were collected using a qualitative research design, and included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal discussions and field interactions with 35 purposively selected women from thirteen Halakki settlements. The results indicate that women are at the heart of the preservation of indigenous knowledge through ritual, oral tradition, folk songs, festivals, life cycle ceremonies and traditional ecological knowledge. They are the main keepers of the ritual knowledge of marriage, childbirth, harvest festivals, worship of the village deity, and domestic religious practices, which are passed down from generation to generation. Elder women are still protecting the intangible cultural heritage of the community despite the difficulties brought by modernization, migration and the changing socio-economic situation. The study underscores the importance of women's cultural leadership and the importance of documenting and preserving indigenous knowledge systems for the future generations.

Keywords: Tribal Women; Ritual Traditions; Indigenous Knowledge; Cultural Heritage; Ethnography

*Assistant Professor, School of Arts, Humanities and Social Science, Chanakya University, Bengaluru

** Centre for Educational and Social Studies, Bengaluru

***Associate Professor, Centre for Educational and Social Studies, Bengaluru Email:soumyabs@cessedu.org

INTRODUCTION

The Halakki Vokkaliga community is a tribal group primarily residing in the forest and coastal regions of Uttara Kannada district in Karnataka. It is a unique indigenous community with rich folk traditions, unique dress, oral literature, ritual practices, ecological knowledge and a community-centred lifestyle. Halakki Vokkaliga women play a pivotal role in preserving and passing on cultural values and practices. Folk songs, storytelling, rituals, agricultural practices, traditional healing, festivals, food and art are all ways in which Halakki women maintain the collective memory and identity of their community.

Women's diverse functions in a tribal society contribute to the maintenance of traditional culture and help to maintain the community's collective memory. Women in a tribal culture represent the link between past and present. They do this by incorporating tradition into all aspects of the community's daily life through everyday practices and the use of knowledge passed down from their ancestors, establishing ongoing links between people living today and those living hundreds or thousands of years ago. The qualitative ethnographic approach is used in this study to gain insight into the role of women as preservers of tradition and custodians of culture. It offers a thorough analysis of the ways in which women's agency is present in the different domains of communal life and reveals how women's agency sustains the continuity of community traditions.

India, many tribal societies have traditional governance systems such as chieftainship, village councils, or customary institutions and exhibit predominantly patriarchal social structures. Men hold the power and control in the community. In such social systems, a woman's status has traditionally been influenced by patriarchal norms rather than her own individual merits. However, women are the key cultural guardians of these societies. They are called upon in the sacred sphere, for spiritual or vocational purposes, and in the social sphere, through their hard work in economic activities such as farm production and forest harvesting. As the main providers and spiritual pillars, their role is qualified by biological biases, resulting in a complex situation where women's essential role in the community is constantly in tension with the rigid norms of patriarchy. The status of the female gender depends on the role they play in the different spheres. Women's roles are constrained due to limited opportunities for social mobility and dual roles of household and job outside of home.

Their contributions in a chieftaincy community contribute to their multifaceted roles, which often go unrecognised or undervalued. Patriarchal cultures view

women as inferior to men and see their dependence upon men as inherent. This study, therefore, seeks to provide a new look at the subordination of women, not only as being less than men, but as being essential to the maintenance and transmission of tradition.

Women play a very important role in the ritual life, domestic spirituality, agricultural festivals and cultural continuity among the Halakki Vokkaliga community. Women are not only culturally recognised as the keepers of domestic duties, but also as the keepers of sacred knowledge, ritual purity, oral traditions, and ancestral customs. Many traditional practices are still alive today because women are still keeping and passing them on in households and Koppas (Halakki hamlet), explained the community elders consistently.

The ritual identity of Halakki women is deeply connected with the community's mythological origin beliefs. The Halakki people believe that they are descendants of Sukri, the daughter of Lord Shiva and Parvathi, according to oral traditions narrated by elder women. The community members described the Taali worn by married women as "Parvathi Mani," thus connecting women's ritual identity to the sacred maternal figure of Parvathi. Therefore, women's ritual involvement is culturally interpreted as social responsibility and continuation of the divine traditions of their ancestors.

Women are actively involved in most of the major community rituals such as: Deepavali, Suggi Habba (Harvest festival), Suggi Kunitha (Harvest dance) observances, Sankranthi, Hulidevaru worship (Worship of the community tiger deity), Thulasi Pooje (Worship of the sacred Tulsi (Holy Basil) plant), marriage ceremonies, puberty rituals, pregnancy rituals, childbirth traditions, village deity worship, Gopooja (Ritual worship of cattle/cows), Hande Pooja (Worship of the traditional bathing vessel), Hunnime Habba (Full-moon festival).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Indigenous Culture, Women and Cultural Preservation.

Tribal communities are social and cultural groups with identities, traditions, livelihoods and spiritual health that are closely linked to their land and natural resources. They tend to have their own culture, language, religion, and social structure, which are different from those of the dominant culture. There are several tribal communities in Karnataka such as Adiyani, Barda, Gond, Bhil, Iruliga,

Koraga, Patelia, Yerava, Hasalaru, Koli Dhor, Marati, Meda, Naikda, Soliga and Halakki Vokkaliga.

The Halakki Vokkaliga community, who are mainly living in the coastal and forest areas of Uttara Kannada district, are known for their rich folk traditions, oral literature, ritual practices, ecological knowledge and community-centred way of life. In the community, women are important agents of cultural values and practices, as they sing folk songs, tell stories, perform rituals, engage in farming, organise festivals, cook, practice traditional healing and create art.

A study by Nayak, P. (2017) employed ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and in-depth interviews with women elders in Halakki villages. Oral performances, folk songs, ritual chants, and storytelling were documented to capture both linguistic and cultural knowledge. The study revealed that Women are the central custodians of Suggi Haadu (harvest songs), ritual chants, and local folklore, preserving both language and cultural values. Oral traditions serve as living archives, embedding ecological knowledge, social ethics, and collective memory. Women actively teach these practices to younger generations through participatory observation, maintaining continuity despite the influence of mainstream Kannada and modern cultural practices.

Sharma and Sharma (2018) noted that tribal women play an important role in preserving culture, protecting the environment and improving the health of their communities. Their involvement is crucial to maintaining cultural diversity and the continuity of traditional knowledge systems. Meanwhile, tribal women suffer from several disadvantages on the basis of gender, tribal identity and socio-economic status. This situation was termed as “triple disadvantage” by Sharma (2018), who pointed out that the problems of tribal women in accessing education, healthcare, land rights and political participation are interlinked.

Studies by Mohanty (2013) and Awasthi (2017) focus on how tribal female members are actively involved in resource management, mobilisation and sustainable development programmes. They not only work in the home, but also lead the way in preserving community traditions and culture.

Women, Oral Traditions and Indigenous Knowledge

Oral traditions are a key element in the preservation and transmission of indigenous knowledge. This knowledge is frequently held by women, who pass on cultural values, beliefs, customs and practical skills through storytelling, songs, rituals and everyday interactions. Tribal women play a significant role in

biodiversity conservation and traditional ecological knowledge, as they are engaged in agriculture, seed selection and resource management, as mentioned by Rao (2016).

Traditional knowledge is normally passed on through families and communities to women via observation, participation and experience. Girls from an early age master the skills of agriculture, cooking, taking care of children, observing religious rituals and domestic chores from their mothers, grandmothers, and other female relatives. Oral traditions are important ways to learn and share knowledge, social values and cultural beliefs from one generation to the next, including ecological knowledge. Local ecosystem knowledge among women is often used for sustainable resource management, including the conservation of crop diversity, seed conservation, soil conservation and water management. These practices have a significant impact on food security and community resilience, as well as on the reduction of environmental impact. Women contribute to the conservation of indigenous knowledge systems and to the reinforcement of cultural identity through the oral traditions and customary practices in which they actively participate.

A study by Rennie, C. & Cajetas-Saranza, M. (2016) employed qualitative narrative analysis of oral songs, myths, and storytelling practices among indigenous women across multiple tribal contexts. Data collection involved in-depth interviews, participant observation, and recordings of storytelling sessions in domestic and communal spaces, emphasising the lived experience of women as cultural transmitters.

Women were identified as the primary custodians of folklore, preserving collective memory, ethical norms, and social values. Oral performances act as living repositories for language, culture, and identity. Through songs, myths, and rituals, women shape intergenerational learning, sustaining cultural cohesion and reinforcing community identity. Their storytelling practices bridge domestic, ritual, and social spaces, resisting cultural homogenization.

Women in Tribal Societies.

Women's role in tribal society has been studied in social, economic and cultural aspects. Moore (1988) proposed that women might have some rights in kinship systems, but social structures related to marriage, inheritance and residence patterns could affect access to resources and opportunities. Likewise, Sinha and Baliyan (2014) noted that the unequal access to land, education, technology, credit and productive resources still affects the economic status of women.

Boserup (1970) made a major contribution to the understanding of women's work by questioning the assumptions about the sexual division of labour. Her comparative study of agricultural societies showed that women frequently are central to agricultural production and subsistence economies. Boserup pointed out the differences in women's work in various societies and the need to acknowledge women's economic role.

The feminisation of agriculture has also been documented in research on agricultural transformation. Male migration, changes in land tenure systems, labour market changes and economic restructuring have led to greater participation of women in agricultural production. But research by Brain (1976), Jones (1982), Mueller (1977), Okeyo (1980) and Remy (1975) indicates that these shifts have not always led to better access to resources or decision-making authority for women.

Mathur (2018) reported that the tribal women in Maharashtra play a significant role in maintaining traditional agricultural knowledge by engaging in mixed cropping, organic composting, seed preservation, and rotational farming. These traditional practices help to ensure ecological sustainability, community knowledge systems and cultural continuity.

Everyday Life, Heritage and the Halakki Community

The significance of everyday life in the process of creation, preservation and transmission of cultural heritage is great. It is not only formal rituals and ceremonies, but also everyday life, social interaction, art, songs and stories, and customary practices. The events and activities which occur each day are a part of a community's culture and collective identity over time. The oral histories and culture of the Halakki Vokkaliga community are well documented in the book, 'White as Milk and Rice: Stories of India's Isolated Tribes' (2020) by Nidhi Dugar Kundalia. The study examines the life and experiences of Sukri Bommagowda using an ethnographic perspective, deconstructing the relationship between oral history, cultural memory, indigenous knowledge and daily life. The work was a reminder of the strong ties between folk songs and oral narration, and a reminder of the Halakki people's ties to their culture and cultural heritage. The study also highlights the importance of women for the continuity of community customs and cultural heritage. It documents oral history, everyday customs, and values, and reflects the significance of women's roles in preserving their identity and heritage.

In their study, Rajeshwari N. and Kurbetta C.N. (2024) aimed to document the unique rituals that are associated with Deepavali among the Halakki Vokkaligas, and examine the roles played by women in planning and conducting these rituals

and how they contribute to the continuity of culture, the building of identity and intergenerational transmission of practice.

The findings in this research document that the Deepavali festival of the Halakki Vokkaligas is much more than a performative festival; it is enmeshed in the ancestral customs and ecological relationships. The ritual activities start with home cleansing and Lakshmi Puja and also incorporate unique tribal elements like bathing in a traditional bathtub filled with medicinal plants and water infused with turmeric and cow urine for spiritual and physical purification, called Hande Pooja. The oil baths in the season are an expression of renewal, as are the steps over a local fruit called hidle kaayi at the door. Oil baths in the season mean renewal, as do the steps over a local fruit called hidle kaayi at the door, symbolising the victory of positivity.

The study reveals that the community's culinary culture, like Kotte Rotti and Akki Payasa (rice-based dishes), demonstrates sustainable food practices and the community's relationship with the seasons. Bathing and decorating the cattle as part of the ritual of Balipadyami play an important role in honouring these cattle, while Dana Bicchuvudu (ceremonial release of worshipped cattle) is an activity that builds social cohesion within the community. A unique practice is that of married daughters/son-in-law visiting their mother's house for Bagina (traditional ceremonial gift given to married daughters) and worshipping the oil lamp, thus strengthening the bonds of kinship and family.

Most importantly, the study examines these rituals not just as traditions but as living processes, reinforcing common values, appreciating nature, and fostering community. In the context of rapid modernisation, these are important continuities, collective reflections, and affirmations of cultural identity.

The study was conducted by Raghava Naik, E. The aim of (2017) was to record (1) the biodiversity of Halakki home gardens, (2) the role of women in conserving agro-biodiversity and contextualising ecological knowledge and practices, and (3) the symbolic and ritual value of gardening practices in the community. The findings showed that Halakki women are the main managers of home gardens, which are living repositories of food crops, medicinal plants, as well as culturally important crops. Rituals and festivals are closely linked to the practice of garden culture and women sing songs and chants at the time of sowing and harvesting. Women are responsible for seed selection, soil management and herbal preparation, embodying a high level of ecological and sustainable practice. The study revealed that home

gardens are both ecological and cultural spaces, where medicinal knowledge, ritual and food habits converge.

Women's labour is not limited to cultivation but also involves passing on ecological and cultural knowledge to the younger generation, thereby ensuring the continuity of practical and symbolic activities. Their practices contribute to family unity, intergenerational transmission of knowledge and the ability of the community to withstand tragedy, proving that craftsmanship is not just about making exquisite objects but also sustainable everyday activities that are part of social life.

The aims of the study (conducted by Hoogar, P. et al. 2017) are to (1) document and analyse life-cycle rituals among Halakki Vokkaliga communities, such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death, (2) to gain an understanding of the social and cultural significance and meaning of these rituals, and (3) to explore the roles of women in performing, maintaining and transmitting ritual knowledge across generations.

The study reveals that life-cycle events play a key role in the sense of community and in the process of identity formation. Women are the main organisers of such events, leading the prayers, singing ritualistic songs, teaching the younger members about symbolic concepts, and making sure that the ritual calendars are followed. The birth ceremony includes setting up auspicious places and chanting sacred words for the blessings of the ancestors. Puberty rituals, especially Ritu Kala Samskara, are concerned with moral and social directions, and they involve domestic training coupled with communal celebration. The marriage rituals are multi-day events, involving women co-ordinating domestic, spiritual and ceremonial activities, and acting as knowledge transmitters. Women conduct death rituals, such as cremations, and practices for remembrance and bereavement even after death.

The study underscores the adaptive and dynamic character of rituals, with religious buildings remaining unchanged, but women's rituals changing creatively as a result of migration, education and contact with the dominant rituals. They are performative, pedagogical and ensure continuity while introducing cultural values in daily life.

Manjunatha (2015) used a qualitative ethnographic methodology, involving participant observation, interviews with women elders, and recording seasonal ritual chants, fertility and agricultural songs, and women's rituals from different tribal groups in Karnataka. He explored the ritual aspects of women's lives. Also, examined the ritual aspects of women's lives with a qualitative ethnographic methodology that included participant observation, interviews with women elders,

and the documentation of ritual chants relating to fertility, agriculture and the seasonal festivals for tribesmen and women from different tribes of Karnataka. Ritual specialists and keepers of sacred oral knowledge were especially emphasised with regard to women. The findings showed that most ritual chants were passed down and maintained primarily through women elders, who maintain the accuracy, spirituality, and symbolism of the chants. These oral expressions are part of the harvest rituals, childbirth ceremonies and ancestral worship. Women's performances preserve the dialect, cultural symbols, and cultural rhythm, and protect the intangible heritage from cultural erosion.

A study by Goel, S. (2024) investigated the storytelling practices in families of tribal communities in India, using life-history interviews and focus group discussions. The special focus was the role of women in their own languages, passing on myths, legends and moral stories to the younger generations. The study found that the language used by Women in the story is deliberately chosen as a native language, so that children can learn both language and cultural values. Storytelling generates emotional linkages with heritage and supports moral and ethical values and norms. Women serve as mediators between formal education and traditional knowledge, and hold the rituals, songs and folklore in their household and community ceremonies.

Modernisation, Migration Vs Cultural continuation

The study was done by Khara, R. and Satapathy, M. (2022), who conducted qualitative field interviews and ethnographic observations in several tribal communities. It aimed to examine the impact of modernisation, formal education, and mainstream cultural norms on women's roles in sustaining cultural heritage. The findings showed that Modernisation and formal education have negative impacts on immersion in rituals, oral traditions, and language use. Women are mediators of knowledge, passing it on at home and in community events. They carefully incorporate new customs and traditions with the spirit of cultural songs, language, and gestures. This combination of aspects allows traditions to evolve while remaining intact in the face of societal shifts.

A semi-structured interview, participatory observation and household survey was used by Rao, S. & Raju, P. (2019) to study migrant and non-migrant Halakki Vokkaliga households in coastal Karnataka. The findings highlighted that cultural preservation is a responsibility that falls on women, as a result of Migration, especially male out-migration. Women create rituals, adjust the timing of festivals and keep oral traditions alive. They teach and perform rituals in their homeland

language and maintain their cultural and linguistic identity. Even as women are mobile and their families change in composition, they continue to carry traditions and community cohesion from generation to generation.

Bhattacharya, S. & Murmu, P. (2021) used ethnographic research methods, such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observations of rituals with several tribal groups in Eastern and Southern India. This aimed to learn about women's experiences facing pressures of modernisation, education, and cultural assimilation. Results indicate that Women are active in opposing cultural homogenisation, keeping rituals, songs, crafts and native language in domestic and community contexts. They selectively bring some modern tools and knowledge, along with relevant traditions, into cultural practice for younger generations. Women have a mediating role between tradition and contemporary influences in preserving, adapting or changing practices.

Study by Sunitha, R. & Mahadevappa, H. A (2016) mixed-methods design with household surveys, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation was employed in the tribal villages of Karnataka. It scrutinised the policies and strategies of government and NGOs towards the cultural, economic and social empowerment of tribal women. The findings revealed that culturally sensitive initiatives, such as craft promotion, microfinance schemes, and heritage workshops, increased women's agency and participation in cultural preservation. Women actively sustain rituals, folk arts, and traditional knowledge while gaining economic independence. Policies acknowledging women as custodians of heritage strengthened both cultural continuity and socio-economic resilience.

NEED FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

The literature review shows that tribal women are important in the conservation of cultural heritage, indigenous knowledge, oral traditions and community practices.

The safeguarding of indigenous cultural heritage depends largely on the continuity of ritual practices, oral traditions and intergenerational knowledge transmission. In many tribal societies, women play a central role in transmitting traditions through active participation in storytelling, folksongs, and various rituals celebrating festivals, life-cycle ceremonies, and domestic rituals. Despite their contribution, their roles are underrepresented in society, particularly in patriarchal contexts where cultural and ritual authorities are associated with men. Further rapid socio-economic changes/growth, modernisation, migration, formal education,

exposure to media and electronic gadgets are transforming indigenous ways of life and placing many traditional practices at risk of decline.

Previous research has identified women's roles in agriculture, resource management, storytelling, rituals, and cultural continuity. Research on the Halakki Vokkaliga community has also documented their oral traditions, folklore, culture, and everyday life. However, although these studies have provided valuable insights into the community, limited attention has been paid to the specific role of Halakki Vokkaliga women in ritual performance, cultural leadership, and the intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge. It is therefore important to examine and document their contribution to the transmission of community traditions and cultural heritage. The present study aims to explore and record these roles within the socio-cultural setting of the Halakki Vokkaliga community.

METHODOLOGY

The present ethnographic observations were made through primary field interaction, participant observation, informal interviews and cultural discussions with the Halakki Vokkaliga community of Honnebayalu, Belambar and the nearby Halakki Koppas (hamlet) of Ankola Taluk, Uttara Kannada district, Karnataka. The research design adopted in this study is qualitative in nature. Primary data were gathered using a mix of interviews, primarily semi-structured interviews with Halakki Vokkaliga women, to understand their experiences, roles, and the social and cultural structures of women's agency. In-depth interviews with Halakki Vokkaliga women also provided deeper insights into the ways they carry out their cultural roles and values in both their social and sacred domains. Special attention was given to women's roles in preserving rituals, oral traditions, storytelling, songs, life-cycle customs, and cultural leadership within the community.

Sampling Design

The study employed a purposive sampling method to select villages with a significant presence of the Halakki Vokkaliga community. Within these villages, respondents with relevant knowledge and experience of ritual practices were identified purposively. To complement this, a snowball sampling technique was employed to identify additional women who were actively involved in ritual and cultural activities based on referrals from the initial respondents and other community members.

A total of 35 women respondents were selected for the study. The sample included women from different age groups, marital statuses, and socio-economic backgrounds to ensure variation in experiences and perspectives. The selection was guided by the criterion that respondents should have active or lived participation in the ritual, domestic, or cultural practices of the community. The sample size was considered adequate as data collection continued until no substantially new themes or insights relevant to the study emerged from the interviews.

Ethical Considerations

All participants gave informed consent prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and the respondents were informed about the purpose of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the research process and cultural values and traditions of the Halakki Vokkaliga community were respected during the study.

FINDINGS

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data gathered from participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal discussions and field notes. The data collected from the respondents was thoroughly analysed, sorted and categorised based on the common themes emerging from the data on women's involvement in community rituals, traditional cultural practices, oral traditions and ritual roles.

Table 1: Demographic indicators and distribution of respondents

Demographic indicators	Observation
Total Respondents Documented	35 women
Age Range	16 years – 85 years
Married	28
Unmarried	6
Widow	1
Joint Family	23
Nuclear Family	12
No Formal Education	18 respondents
Primary Education(1 st – 6 th Std)	5 respondents
Secondary Education(7 th – 10 th Std)	6 respondents
Higher Secondary(PUC)	3 Respondents
Higher Education(GNM/Degree)	3 respondents

Primary Occupation	Housewife (majority), Farming, and Wage Labour
Professional Workers	Teachers -2, Nurse-1, ASHA-1, Anganwadi worker-1
Language (Primary)	Halakki Kannada
Taluk / District	Ankola Taluk, Uttara Kannada District, Karnataka
Inter-caste Marriage	Not supported by community elders.
Villages Covered	Belambar, Honnebayalu, Addlahalli, Adduru, Yellapura, Tenginmurti, Kandi, Bobbaravaga Majali, Hedgeri, Kadwad, Mittamanne, Ankola Town

The study was conducted with 35 women of the Halakki Vokkaliga community from various villages of Ankola Taluk, Uttara Kannada District (Table 1). The respondents were of different age groups from 16 to 85 years. The majority of the respondents were married and lived in joint family households, reflecting the continued significance of family and kinship networks in the community. The level of education was generally low, with a few respondents having higher education and working in professional occupations. Most women were involved in domestic activities, agriculture and casual labour. The demographic profile is a reflection of the socio-cultural context in which women carry out their ritual and cultural duties.

Women's Involvement in Rituals

The results show that women are actively involved in various religious and ritual practices in the community. They actively participated in festivals such as Deepavali, Suggi Habba (Harvest festival), Sankranti, Hunnime Habba (Full-moon festival), Thulasi Pooje (Worship of the sacred Tulsi (Holy Basil) plant), Hulidevaru worship (Worship of the community tiger deity/spirit deity), Gopooja (Ritual worship of cattle/cows), Hande Pooja (Worship of the traditional bathing vessel) and worship of the village deity. Women also participated in significant life-cycle events related to birth, puberty, marriage, pregnancy and childbirth.

Women were important in preparing ritual materials, decorating ritual spaces, preparing sacred food offerings, observing ritual norms, and in prayers and ceremonial activities. It was discovered that their involvement was necessary to the proper performance of numerous community rituals and household ceremonies.

The findings indicate that Halakki Vokkaliga women actively participate in a wide range of ritual practices associated with festivals, life-cycle events, household worship, and village deity traditions. Their roles are not just to participate, but also to engage in ritual preparation, guide ritual performances, maintain sacred spaces, prepare ritual items, and pass on ritual knowledge to posterity.

Women's Participation in Deepavali and Hande Pooja: Worship of the traditional bathing vessel (Neeru Tumbuva Habba)

Among the various festivals observed by the Halakki Vokkaliga community, Deepavali occupies an important place in ritual life. Women play a central role in preparing the household for the festival through cleaning and decorating the house with rangoli, preparing ritual offerings, and organising Lakshmi Pooja. A distinctive Halakki ritual associated with Deepavali is Hande Pooja (Worship of the traditional bathing vessel) or Neeru Tumbuva Habba (Festival of filling the ceremonial water vessel). During this ritual, a traditional bathing vessel known as the Hande is thoroughly cleaned and filled with water. Women add gomutra (cow urine), kumkuma, and arashina (turmeric) to the water and decorate the vessel with locally available plants such as intle kaayi balli (local fruit creeper), Kusumamale, gondi hoovu, and ile patti. Women also prepare turmeric-infused oil and other ritual materials required for the ceremony. On the following morning, family members take a ritual bath after applying the turmeric-infused oil. Before entering the house, they step over a hidle kaayi (a local fruit) placed at the entrance, which is believed to ward off negativity and bring prosperity. The preparation of ritual offerings, decoration of the Hande, organisation of ceremonial activities, and observance of ritual practices are largely carried out by women. Their active involvement in these rituals highlights their important role in preserving and sustaining the ritual traditions of the Halakki Vokkaliga community.

The present findings are consistent with the studies of Rajeshwari and Kurbetta (2024), who observed that women occupy a central position in preserving the ritual and cultural traditions of the Halakki Vokkaliga community. Similarly, Nayak (2017) reported that women perform significant roles in ritual preparation, ceremonial observances, and the transmission of indigenous cultural practices. The present study further demonstrates that women's participation extends beyond ritual performance to include the organisation, preservation, and intergenerational transmission of ritual knowledge.

Women as Custodians of Ritual Knowledge

Field observations revealed that women possess specialised knowledge of ritual procedures and customary observances associated with major festivals and life-cycle ceremonies. Elder women are particularly respected for their knowledge of ritual sequences and are frequently consulted during ceremonial occasions.

In marriage ceremonies, elder women guide younger family members in rituals such as Veelya (Engagement ceremony / Betel-leaf exchange ceremony), Kumba Kalsa (Sacred pot ritual performed during marriage ceremonies), Akki Merayudu (Ritual blessing with rice grains), Ookale Ata (Ring-finding ceremony/game performed by bride and groom), Ele Kodu (Ritual exchange or offering of ceremonial leaves), and Dhare (Marriage solemnization ritual involving ceremonial pouring of milk). They explain the significance of the Parvathi Mani Taali (Sacred marriage necklace associated with Goddess Parvathi) and supervise the preparation of ceremonial foods, betel leaves, coconuts, and other ritual materials required for the wedding.

Women also possess knowledge related to puberty rituals, where elder women supervise the three-day observance following a girl's first menstruation. They instruct young girls regarding ritual restrictions, food practices, ceremonial behaviour, and social responsibilities associated with womanhood.

Similarly, women maintain knowledge of Bayake Biduvudu (Pregnancy blessing ceremony (similar to baby shower)), the traditional pregnancy ceremony. Elder women organise ritual gatherings, guide the preparation of offerings such as sarees, bangles, moong, and sandalwood items, and advise pregnant women regarding traditional dietary practices, including the consumption of Bettada Beru (Medicinal Forest root traditionally consumed during pregnancy) for maternal well-being.

Traditional childbirth knowledge is also largely preserved by women. Elder women historically assisted deliveries using customary practices such as the use of roof-hung ropes for labour support, squatting delivery positions, dry grass bedding, and postnatal care practices. They also prepare traditional recovery foods such as Kuchalakki Anna and Patya Saru (dietary preparation) and supervise Sarne Roga (health condition) treatments after childbirth.

During religious observances, women possess knowledge relating to Thulasi Pooje (Worship of the sacred Tulsi (Holy Basil) plant), where they perform worship and sing Govinda Rayana Hadu (Devotional songs sung in praise of Lord Govinda), and Suggi Habba (Harvest festival), where they organise Kanike (Ritual offering), ritual hospitality, ceremonial feeding, and preparations associated with harvest

celebrations. Women also maintain knowledge of Hulidevaru worship (Worship of the community tiger deity/spirit deity), Gopooja (Ritual worship of cattle/cows), Hunnime Habba (Full-moon festival), and village deity rituals, including the preparation of sacred offerings, ritual decorations, flower garlands, and ceremonial spaces.

Through their knowledge of rituals such as Veelya (Engagement ceremony / Betel-leaf exchange ceremony), Akki Merayudu (Ritual blessing with rice grains), Ookale Ata (Ring-finding ceremony/game performed by bride and groom), Bayake Biduvudu (Pregnancy blessing ceremony (similar to baby shower)), Govinda Rayana Hadu (Devotional songs sung in praise of Lord Govinda), Suggi Habba (Harvest festival), Hulidevaru worship (Worship of the community tiger deity/spirit deity), and other customary observances, women serve as the principal custodians of ritual knowledge and ensure its transmission from one generation to the next within the Halakki Vokkaliga community.

These findings corroborate the observations of Rennie and Cajetas-Saranza (2016), who emphasised women's role as custodians of oral traditions and indigenous knowledge. Similarly, Raghava Naik (2017) highlighted the importance of women's participation in preserving ritual practices and cultural continuity among indigenous communities. The present study further documents the specialised ritual knowledge possessed by Halakki Vokkaliga women in relation to marriage, childbirth, harvest festivals, and village deity worship.

Women and the Preservation of Cultural Traditions

Women were found to actively contribute to folk songs, storytelling, narration, traditional activities and festivals, and social gatherings, which play an important role in the maintenance of cultural traditions. These practices were seen as important for community identity and cultural continuity by the respondents. Often, cultural knowledge was encapsulated in everyday activities, rituals and interactions between family members. Women's participation in these practices is vital to the maintenance of important elements of Halakki cultural heritage. Many of these cultural traditions are transmitted through ritual occasions, festivals and ceremonial gatherings, thereby linking cultural preservation with ritual practice.

The findings support the studies of Goel (2024) and Bhattacharya and Murmu (2021), which reported that women play a vital role in safeguarding oral traditions, folk songs, and cultural heritage. Similar observations were made in the present study, where women's active participation in storytelling, festivals, and ritual

performances contributed significantly to the continuity of Halakki cultural traditions.

Ritual Identity and Symbolic Significance of Women

Field observations revealed that women's ritual roles were closely linked to the beliefs of the community and its oral history. The respondents talked about stories of Sukri and the importance of “Parvathi Mani” worn by married women. These beliefs connect women to the cultural and religious practices of the sacral tradition and reaffirm women's importance in ritual life. Such cultural icons serve to recognise women as important agents of community tradition and religion.

The present findings are consistent with the studies of Rajeshwari and Kurbetta (2024), who observed that ritual symbols and customary beliefs play an important role in shaping women's cultural identity among the Halakki Vokkaliga community. Similarly, Nayak (2017) noted that ritual symbols and oral traditions reinforce women's social and religious roles. The present study further demonstrates that symbols such as the Parvathi Mani continue to represent women's ritual identity and cultural significance within the community.

Multiple Responsibilities of Women

Based on field observations, the role that the women of the Halakki Vokkaliga have in the performance of rituals is not considered to be the end of their duties. Women are the key managers of household activities, agricultural activities, kinship relations and community welfare. The majority of respondents reported that they had to manage domestic work and farm activities (sowing, weeding, harvesting, storing seeds, handling livestock and collecting forest resources). Their participation is a vital part of the subsistence and economic security of households. Women are also significantly involved in social networking within and between Halakki Koppas(hamlet). They organise family visits, support relatives in life-cycle events, engage in mutual help and enhance community solidarity through daily interactions. During marriage, childbirth, sickness and emergencies of the family, informal support measures were seen among women and were in the nature of collective labour and cooperation. An important responsibility is ecological knowledge and the management of resources. Women have practical knowledge of local plants, their cycles, food resources, medicinal herbs, and forest products. This knowledge is used to inform household nutrition, health care and sustainable use of natural resources. Elder women showed a high degree of knowledge about locally available plant species and their significance and uses. The study also revealed that women are more and more involved in village-level activities, community

development programmes and Self-Help Groups. These transactions help to generate income for the household, collective savings, social support and community decision-making processes. They are thus responsible not only for the economy, but also for the environment, for family wellbeing and for social cohesion, highlighting their key role in maintaining everyday life and social fabric in the Halakki Vokkaliga community.

The findings are in agreement with the studies of Mathur (2018) and Rao and Raju (2019), which highlighted that indigenous women simultaneously perform domestic, agricultural, ecological, and community responsibilities. Similarly, the present study found that Halakki women contribute not only to ritual life but also to household management, environmental conservation, livelihood activities, and community welfare.

Intergenerational Variations in Cultural Knowledge

The responses reflected noticeable variations across age groups among the 35 women respondents, whose ages ranged from 16 to 85 years. Elder women, particularly those above 50 years of age, demonstrated extensive knowledge of ritual procedures, Hadugalu (Traditional songs), oral narratives, sacred plants, childbirth traditions, and customary practices. Many of these respondents had little or no formal education, yet possessed substantial indigenous knowledge acquired through lifelong participation in community rituals and cultural activities. Middle-aged women, most of whom were married and living in joint families, actively participated in ritual observances and possessed practical knowledge relating to festivals, life-cycle ceremonies, food traditions, and cultural practices. Younger respondents, including those with secondary, higher secondary, and higher education, were generally familiar with major festivals and customs but displayed comparatively less detailed knowledge of traditional songs, ritual sequences, and oral traditions.

Several elderly women expressed concern that education, migration, wage employment, and changing lifestyles are reducing opportunities for younger generations to learn customary practices through direct participation. One elderly woman remarked, *"Ivattina hudugiyaru namma sampradayada haadugalanna kaleyalu asakti torisuttilla. Yaaru kaleyadiddare, namma sampradaya nidhanavagi mareyabahudu."* ("Nowadays, many young girls are not showing interest in learning our traditional songs. If no one learns them, our traditions may gradually disappear.")

A young woman emphasised the importance of preserving their cultural identity, stating, "*Namma samskruti ulisabeku, yaakandre adu namma guruthu. Namma hiriyarinda namma sampradayavannu kalitu mundina peeligege talupisabeku.*" ("Our culture should be preserved because it is our identity. We should learn our traditions from our elders and pass them on to the next generation.")

Another young respondent shared the practical challenges of preserving traditions, saying, "*Ivattu Halakki sampradayada batte dharisodu mattu ella acharaneya haadugalan nenapittukollodu kashtavagide. Odhu mattu kelasadinda yuva mahileyarige ivugalan kaleyuva avakasha kadime agide.*" ("Wearing the traditional Halakki attire and remembering all the ritual songs is becoming difficult today. Many young women are busy with education and work, so they have fewer opportunities to learn them.")

These perspectives illustrate the growing intergenerational gap in cultural knowledge and highlight the challenges associated with preserving and transmitting the ritual traditions of the Halakki Vokkaliga community.

These findings are consistent with Khara and Satapathy (2022), who observed that modernisation, migration, and formal education are influencing the transmission of indigenous knowledge among tribal communities. Similarly, Bhattacharya and Murmu (2021) reported a gradual decline in the intergenerational transfer of traditional knowledge due to changing socio-economic conditions. The present study also found that while elderly women continue to possess extensive ritual knowledge, younger generations demonstrate comparatively lower familiarity with traditional songs and ritual practices.

Village-wise Variations in Ritual Continuity

Village-wise comparisons revealed more similarities than differences across the study, which covered 13 villages, namely Belambar, Honnebayalu, Addlahalli, Adduru, Yellapura, Tenginmurti, Kandi, Bobbaravaga, Majali, Hedgeri, Kadwad, Mittamanne, and Ankola Town. Core cultural practices such as Suggi Habba (Harvest festival), Deepavali, Thulasi Pooje (Worship of the sacred Tulsi (Holy Basil) plant), Hulidevaru worship (Worship of the community tiger deity/spirit deity), marriage rituals, puberty ceremonies, and Bayake Biduvudu (Pregnancy blessing ceremony (similar to baby shower)) were reported across all villages. However, respondents from more remote Halakki Koppas (hamlet) reported stronger continuity of dialect usage, ritual participation, and oral traditions, whereas respondents from villages with greater access to towns, education, and employment opportunities reported increasing exposure to modern influences and declining

participation among younger generations. Despite these minor variations, women across all villages were consistently recognised as the primary custodians of ritual knowledge, cultural traditions, and community identity. The findings therefore indicate that age and exposure to modernisation influence the depth of cultural knowledge, while the fundamental role of women in preserving Halakki cultural heritage remains consistent across the study area.

These findings support the observations of Khara and Satapathy (2022), who reported that modernisation and increased interaction with urban areas influence the continuity of indigenous cultural practices. Similarly, Rao and Raju (2019) observed that remote tribal settlements tend to preserve traditional customs more strongly than communities with greater exposure to modern education and employment. The present study similarly found that while cultural practices remain common across villages, ritual continuity is comparatively stronger in remote Halakki settlements.

CONCLUSION

The present study provides an ethnographic understanding of the role of Halakki Vokkaliga women in sustaining the community's ritual life and cultural heritage. By documenting women's lived experiences and indigenous knowledge, the study highlights that their contributions extend beyond domestic responsibilities to encompass cultural leadership, ritual continuity, and the transmission of traditional knowledge across generations. In doing so, the study addresses an important gap in the existing literature, where women's ritual roles within the Halakki Vokkaliga community have received limited scholarly attention.

The study contributes to the fields of social work, tribal studies, and indigenous knowledge by generating context-specific evidence on the cultural agency of tribal women. It underscores the importance of recognising women as active knowledge holders and cultural custodians whose contributions are essential for sustaining intangible cultural heritage. The findings also suggest the need for greater documentation of indigenous knowledge systems and for community-based initiatives that encourage younger generations to engage with their cultural traditions.

As the study was confined to selected Halakki Vokkaliga settlements in Ankola Taluk, its findings cannot be generalised to all tribal communities. Future research may undertake comparative studies across different tribal groups or geographical

regions and explore the changing role of women in the context of education, migration, livelihood transitions, and technological change. Such studies would further strengthen the understanding of indigenous women's contributions to cultural sustainability and inform culturally sensitive policies and interventions.

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