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# When Kodagu merged with Mysore: A short political history of the region

An erstwhile independent state, Coorg was merged with Mysore after the States Reorganisation Act was passed in 1956.



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It was S Nijalingappa's death anniversary on August 8 and I was reading about the unified Mysore state's first Assembly elections in order to get some insights about the first and one of the longest serving Chief Ministers of our state. One article led to another and I found myself in the middle of several articles about Coorg's merger with Mysore. It

was such an interesting revelation that I kept hopping from one article to another and got deeper into the rabbit hole.

Since most of us outside of Kodagu are informed just in passing in our textbooks about how Coorg was an independent state before the unification, I thought this was a story worth telling.

After more than a century of direct British rule since its annexation from its last ruler Chikka Veera Rajendra (in 1834), Coorg became an independent (Type C) state within India along with other small, hilly, erstwhile princely states like Himachal Pradesh. Coorg had a strong Congress party presence and participated enthusiastically in the freedom struggle, with even stalwarts like Gandhi visiting the state on a few occasions to mobilise the immensely patriotic people from the land of coffee, commanders and Kaveri.

But the Congress leadership within Coorg was heavily divided over whether to remain an independent state or to join the larger neighbouring state of Mysore. While one faction led by the Gandhian CM Poonacha was more pragmatic in seeing the impracticality of a tiny state like Coorg being allowed to remain independent in a country as large as India and being open to the idea of merging with Mysore since Kannada was already the language broadly used in education and administration within Coorg, the other faction led by another Gandhian Pandiyanda Belliappa was , staunchly against the merger. The loyalty of both factions and leaders, however, lay with the Congress.

When the legislative assembly elections were announced in late 1951, to be held along with the first ever election to independent India's parliament, the Pandiyanda Belliappa faction moved away from the Mysore-sympathetic Congress and formed the Thakkadi Party (weighing machine), contesting as independents on the plank of Coorg's continuation as an independent state.

In what was a Brexit style election to decide the future of Coorg state, the Congress emerged victorious, winning 15 seats in the 24-member Coorg Assembly, while the Thakkadi Party won the remaining 9 seats. Questions were raised about the fairness of the elections as allegations surfaced that voters were sent from the neighbouring towns in Mysore to vote for the Congress, in effect for Coorg's merger with Mysore. Poonacha, however, took oath as Coorg's first and only elected Chief Minister and ruled till 1956 with a two-member Cabinet.

In 1956, the States Reorganisation Act was passed in the Parliament by the Nehru government, allowing Coorg's merger with Mysore. Several efforts were made by key dignitaries from Coorg to secure an independent state status, including the decorated Field Marshal KM Cariappa, who was then serving as India's High Commissioner to Australia and New Zealand. He wrote a letter to President Rajendra Prasad, making a case for Coorg to remain an independent state. But it proved too little, too late as the Nehru-led Congress government remained committed to the Act and reined in dissent within the party units across states.

When the bill was taken up to be voted by Coorg's Assembly as it required ratification by state assemblies before becoming a legislation, 22 out of 24 legislators, including

Pandiyanda Belliappa, voted for Coorg's merger with Mysore. The first and only elected legislative assembly and government of Coorg was thus dissolved, paving the way for its integration with the unified Mysore state.

Poonacha went on to serve both the Mysore and central governments in various capacities as cabinet minister holding various important portfolios, and also served as the Governor of Odisha and Madhya Pradesh. He was also Coorg's representative in the Constituent Assembly. Coorg also sent two members to independent India's first elected Parliament. After its merger with Mysore, however, Coorg was clubbed with Mangalore earlier and Mysore later into a single parliamentary constituency. It sends two legislators to the 224-member state assembly of Karnataka.

Many people in Coorg are still divided and emotional over the issue of Coorg's merger with Mysore. The Codava National Council, under the leadership of NU Nachappa, fought for the restoration of statehood for Coorg for several decades. But it has now toned down its demand to that of an autonomous development board exclusively for Coorg within Karnataka, with many other perks similar to those offered to other sparsely populated hilly regions and tribes in the Himalayas and the North East.

Kodagu, the official name of the district, is one of the most developed districts of Karnataka across most parameters of development. With an HDI of 0.817, it is only behind Bengaluru, Dakshina Kannada and Udupi in terms of human development. As it reels under another bout of floods this monsoon, let us keep the beautiful Coorg in our prayers and cherish its less known history.

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