3.1 History and Administration

The history of Coorg (as it was called before 1956), prior to the 9th century A.D. does not emerge clearly from historical records. However, the travelogues, colonial historical documents and administrative records provide sufficient insights for us to picture the land and its people. The systematically documented history of the district starts with the British occupation of the province. An abundance of forest wealth mentioned in all the historical records about Coorg recognises it as the most significant factor that shaped the colonial interest in the province. Further, these records trace Coorg's economic travails over a period of time. It is thus, evident that for a long time in history, Coorg has borne the tag of an economically developed district. Folk songs of the 18th century claim that people in this region never faced a shortage of food and being a surplus food producing area, they even traded with the Malabar regions for products such as salt in exchange for rice (Rice, 1878).

In addition to being an economically rich region, it was also very sparsely populated. Quoting various historical records and government records, Veena Poonacha (1996) writes:

That Coorg was a sparsely populated area has been noted by the ethnographers of the late 19th and 20th centuries. In the 19th century, the population density in Coorg was approximately 84.2 per square mile. In 1871, there were 1,68,312 persons
dwelling in 22,900 houses in 495 villages. Given the approximate area of Coorg at that time (as 2,000 sq. miles), persons per sq. mile were 84.2; houses per sq. mile were 11.5; and the average number of persons per village was 340. The Coorgs, who constituted the dominant group in the area, were returned as a mere 26,309 in the Census records. In the first half of the 20th century, there was an increase in the population of about 27 per cent, which was more due to the immigration of labourers to the coffee plantations than to a natural increase.

Before the British occupation, Coorg had a violent political history, with the dominant Kodava tribe constantly at war with its neighbours. The 18th century proved to be turning point for the Coorgs, when they faced a threat to their political supremacy. Since 1773, the Coorgs were constantly at war, first with Hyder Ali, then with Tipu Sultan, and subsequently with various rulers of Mysore State, till it was officially taken over by the British in 1834. The British appointed Captain Cole, previously The Resident of Mysore, as the Superintendent of Coorg to administer and maintain the peace in the area (Richter, 1870). Thus, until the advent of the British in 1834, Kodagu had always been an independent principality. After Independence, Kodagu was designated the status of a Part C state, that is, the state could exercise independent control in all matters except those subjects like external affairs, military, etc., which were handled by the Central government. When the state of Karnataka was formed in 1956, Kodagu was included in the new state. Since then, administratively it is a part of Mysore Division.

Karnataka has four administrative divisions — Bangalore, Belgaum, Gulbarga and Mysore division.
Kodagu is a small district with three Taluks, 101 Gram Panchayats and 16 Hoblies. Before proceeding further, it is important to note that even prior to its amalgamation with Mysore state, Coorg was the smallest province in British India. The total population of Coorg, when the British took over in 1834 was around 80,000. In terms of area (2,200 sq. km) too, it was one of the smallest in the British jurisdiction measuring a mere 60 miles in length and 40 miles in breadth.

### 3.2 Profile: Geography and Economy

Kodagu is situated on the summits and eastern declivities of the Western Ghats and shares a state border with Kerala and district borders with Dakshina Kannada, Hassan and Mysore. The district covers a land area of 4,102 sq. km, representing a mere two per cent of Karnataka’s geographical area. As the district is situated on the summit of the Western Ghat range, the land is undulating and hilly with an average elevation of about 3,000 feet above sea level. Though a number of rivers and streams criss-cross across the district, there is no large river in this area. Even the Cauvery, which has its origins in this district, is not known for its width in this area. Due to its geographical positioning, the district is endowed with a mix of various fertile soil types ranging from clayey dark soil to laterite and sandy loamy type. The district receives heavy rainfall, an average of about 115 inches per annum. The months of June, July and August receive the heaviest rainfall. However, there are internal differences, with the intensity of rainfall varying as one moves from the eastern side of the district to the western. Variation in rainfall is significant, as it is an important determinant of the productivity of the land and the
cropping pattern. Kodagu has always been known for its forests and both the inhabitants and the state stratify the forest using different categories. The people classify the forests as *male kadu* (mountainous forest), *kanive kadu* (lower hill ranges), *paisari kadu* (government wastelands), *devara kadu* (sacred forest) and *urudeves* (village forest).

Kodagu is one of Karnataka’s smallest and least populous districts (Census, 1991). Its present population of 4,88,455 accounts for only one per cent of the state’s total population. The district has a population density of 119 persons per sq. km, which is low compared to the figure of 274 for India, and 235 for the state. Eighty-four per cent of the district’s population lives in rural areas. Levels of per capita income in Kodagu have always been higher than the state average. Kodagu has a per capita income of Rs. 3,504 (1980-81) at constant prices and Rs. 11,150 at current prices (1992-93), higher than the state averages of Rs. 2,315 and Rs. 6443 respectively. It is ranked second or first out of the 20 districts depending on whether constant or current prices are used. It is predominantly a plantation economy, with income from plantations accounting for a major share of the state domestic product, and providing employment to nearly three-fourths of the working population. In actual terms, forests cover 33 per cent of the land area, and the net area sown represents 36 per cent of the land area. Some of the chief crops grown in the district are coffee, pepper, cardamom, rice and oranges. Prior to the

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29 The Census of India classifies an area as urban if it meets the following criteria: a minimum population of 5,000 persons; a population of at least 400 persons per sq. km; and at least 75% of the male working population engaged in non-agricultural (and allied) activity. All other places are classified as rural.
growth of coffee as a major cash crop\textsuperscript{30}, rice cultivation was the mainstay of the economy.

3.3 Land Ownership

Land ownership has always been dynamic in this region. From the early travelogues and writings on Kodagu, it is clear that ‘developments’ of various kinds have been continuously taking place. As in other parts of India, the passage of administrative control to the British resulted in substantial changes and since Independence, there has been an accelerated pace of change. However, the historical patterns of land-ownership and land tenure have impacted the present pattern of land holdings. The district gazetteers provided the first view of the relationship between different landowners. The district gazetteers and other land records allow us to further understand the changes in relationships that existed and occurred over time.

Prior to the advent of the British, the landholding system in Kodagu was hereditary and proprietary. Jamma tenure was granted to all those who demonstrated their loyalty to the rulers as a sign of appreciation. Although it seems that only Kodavas were initially granted Jamma tenural rights, it is clear from a number of studies that others, too, such as the Vokkaligas and the Malyalam-speaking Mopillas, were later granted Jamma rights.

\textsuperscript{30} Coffee as a major cash crop was introduced in 1845, when European planters opened up large tracts of land for cultivation.
The British, too, continued this practice of rewarding those who rendered services to the government. This can be seen in the case of the 1837 suppression of the Canara rebellion, where in the British government granted Jamma tenures to all those who rendered military services and thus demonstrated loyalty.

However, it is important to remember that the character of Jamma tenure changed during the British administration as they abolished slavery. The later part 19th century was a traumatic time for the Jamma ryots. Though the impact was not felt immediately, the ryots faced a major shortage of labour with the spread of coffee plantations. Most of the labourers left their earlier masters to work for European coffee planters due to the enormous disparity between the wages that they were previously earning and the wages that were given by the European coffee planters. It is during this period (around 1864) that the British government reluctantly allowed the Ryots to sublet their land. Though Jamma tenure was the most prestigious, and by far the largest, in terms of tenure systems, there were other lesser known tenural systems such as Sagu, Umbli, Gauda-umbli, Sarvamanya, Jodi etc., wherein land was granted to even those who could not render military service. However, like Jamma, each of these systems made it mandatory that land would be granted only to those who had rendered some kind of service to the Government. As in the case of Jamma tenures, the late 19th century saw changes in the tenure systems too.

The dominant caste groups who paid tenural rents to the Government were Kodavas, Mopillas, Vokkaligas and Airis (traders). Below the tenural ryots, the population was
generally involved in cultivation and was dominated by those belonging to the untouchable castes such as Yeravas, Kurubas, Pales, Holayas etc. These were basically slaves attached to the dominant communities. The abolition of slavery and introduction of coffee plantations has changed the entire character of the labouring class and caste. In fact, as early as 1805, there is evidence that division of property within the family was allowed. This obviously reduced the size of the landholding to a considerable extent. This change, along with the system of sub-letting, which gained popularity around 1864, caused the tenural planters and landlords to sublet their land to people belonging to various cultivating castes. Also, in this period, with the abolition of slavery, there was a major labour shortage, due to which the landlords resorted to getting labour from neighbouring districts and provinces such as Madras Presidency, Canara, Kerala etc.

From various records, it is clear that rents and land revenues were revised many times in the British period. Along with division of landholdings and tenancies between sons and the failure to meet obligations to the Government, most landholdings in Kodagu district were already reduced to small ones by 1950s. However, in the wake of Independence and merging with the Mysore state, many European planters withdrew from the district and this resulted in a large-scale absorption of ‘outside’ plantation owners. This, in some ways, altered the political structure of the district by giving space to the neo-elite and the non-Coorg elite.
3.4 Irrigation and Cropping

There is now enough evidence to conclude that prior to the coming of British and consequent introduction of coffee plantation, the economy was purely agrarian with paddy being grown in large quantities. People grew paddy in ancestral homesteads, and in spite of the absence of a trading class in this region, people from homesteads exported surplus paddy to their neighbours in Malabar and Canara.

The geographical location of Kodagu guarantees reliable rains during the monsoons. However, the story Kodagu agriculture since the mid-19th century is essentially one of increasing concentration of coffee and pepper plantations, and relegation of paddy cultivation for consumption purposes. Heavy rainfall areas still account for a larger share of paddy cultivation and productivity, followed by areas under irrigation. At present, low rainfall areas are almost devoid of paddy cultivation. Similarly, irrigated areas have more of Arabica variety of coffee, which fetches a higher market value than un-irrigated and areas with less rainfall grow more Robusta, a type of coffee with less market price. However, it has to be noted that on the whole in the district, paddy cultivation is on the decrease due to several reasons including that of scarcity of labour, economic non-viability due to high wages and low profit margin as compared to coffee.
3.5 Importance of Plantation Economy

The most significant feature of Kodagu is the extent to which the district relies on coffee as its main crop. In order to comprehend the political economy of the region, it is necessary for us to closely look at the special features of coffee as a crop and as a product. Coffee has been grown in India for about two centuries now. In recent times, it is mainly grown in the southern regions and nationally a major share is produced from Karnataka. Other than Kodagu in Karnataka, the districts of Chikmagalur, Hassan, Mysore and Shimoga also cultivate coffee. Most significantly, as a majority of the coffee planters in the area range from being small to marginal planters, the price of coffee has become the sole determinant of the welfare of all those who depend on it. The price of coffee thus determines the livelihoods of the majority in Kodagu district. This was evident during the period spanning the Depression and Second World War, wherein the price of coffee fell sharply affecting the district economy severely. Recognising the disastrous and serious consequence of this price reduction, the state decided to establish the Coffee Board, which had since sustained the industry for a long period. Nevertheless, by the 1980s, the planters association lobbied against the Coffee Board, which till then had a monopoly over the produce for sale and marketing. The planters demanded that the board release a share of the produce as free quota. In the 1990s, the Coffee Board completely withdrew the monopoly of sale and marketing. This was a welcome change for the planters as now they could make more profits. Following the board's withdrawal, the market saw a distinct increase in the price of coffee. This high price of coffee in the
international market continued and the visible opulence in the district was generally attributed to the profits that the planters made during this period. This period also witnessed a revision of wages by the industry.

3.6 Introducing the Research Sites

The three Gram Panchayats chosen for this study belong to Virajpet Taluk, and together represent 0.36 per cent of the district area. Virajpet Taluk shares a state border with Kerala, a district border with Mysore, and Taluk borders with Madikere and Somwarpet. Maldare, Siddapur and Chennayana Kote are contiguous Panchayats, situated in the western part of the Taluk, i.e. closer to the Mysore district.

The present population of the three Panchayats is 29,103, accounting for 6 per cent of the district’s population. Amongst these, Siddapur Gram Panchayat is the most populous with a figure of 8,698, followed by Maldare (6,054) and Chennayana Kote (5,084). However, Siddapur and Maldare Gram Panchayats comprise of more than one revenue-generating village. Siddapur Gram Panchayat consists of three revenue villages namely Guhiya, Kardigodu and Siddapur while Maldare Gram Panchayat consists of Maldare and Badaga Banangala. The population density is higher in Siddapur and Badaga Banangala as compared to the other revenue villages. Amongst all these revenue villages, Siddapur is the biggest one with shops, vegetable and fruit markets, bus terminus, police station, etc.
Maldare, Siddapur and Chennayana Kote are typical of the district in that coffee, pepper, cardamom and rice are the main crops grown here. Also, like in the rest of the district, large tracts of plantation land in all the three Gram Panchayats are owned by big multinational corporations such as Bombay-Burma Trading Company (BBTC) and Consolidated Coffee (a subsidiary of the Tatas) Limited.

The levels of infrastructural development in the district are fairly good. Most of the villages are electrified. Though there are no railways connecting the district to different parts of the state, transportation facilities are adequate with inter-state and inter-district buses regularly. Within the district too, it is possible to travel by road in buses or in hired jeeps, which operate like mini-buses to remote areas where bus services are irregular. Banking facilities of various types such as commercial banks, grameen banks, credit co-operative banks and societies are available. Despite being a relatively small district, it has as many as 108 banks and 93 credit co-operative societies. Both Maldare and Siddapur Panchayats have their own credit co-operative societies. This is in addition to three commercial banks in Siddapur. Maldare also has a grain bank in which grains, coffee, etc. is stored till prices are right for sale.

In all the three Panchayats, the predominant activity is plantation, and most households can be classified according to ownership of land. Both, from land records as well as from the local residents, it is clear that the dominant caste in all three Panchayats — the Kodavas — own the largest proportion of the land (as owned by residents). Though, there have all along been a certain number of Mopilla and other Malayalee plantation owners,
in the past two decades, the number of Malayalee plantation owners have increased substantially and many of them now happen to be absentee landlords. For almost two decades now, two large trans-national industrial corporations — BBTC and Tata Consolidated — have been the owners of the largest plantations in the area.

Apart from owning the majority of land, in all three Panchayats, the Kodavas dominate the Panchayats politically as well. Among all the other linguistic communities, the Malyalam-speaking population has been slowly gaining political ground while other castes and communities continue to hold subordinate positions. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Siddapur, Maldare and Chennayana Kote differ from the other Panchayat areas in the district in terms of the number of seats reserved for the adhyaksha and upadhyaksha and the Taluk and Zilla Panchayat members in a single geographical area. However, these factors do not make them unreliable sources of evidence. The differences that we see are more in terms of degree than kind.