



The Expression of Peasant Protest in Medieval South Kanara

Dr.Prasada N

Dr.Prasada N
Hod,Department
Of History
Kss,College
Subrahmanya

Abstract

The early medieval socio-economic formation was marked by a grossly unequal distribution of land rights and also of the agricultural produce. A large number of landlords were not directly engaged in cultivation but lived on rent, mainly in kind, collected from the cultivators. They also exploited the labour of the peasants for various purposes. Peasantry as a class was engaged in agricultural production and possessing the necessary means of production or using them on definite conditions. It is a well-known fact that the peasant had been the underdog throughout early history and he had been subjugated and exploited because he had been the chief human agency for producing the items required for the maintenance of life. In the case of South Kanara they included local chiefs and Ballalas who can be classified as rich peasants, middle peasants (who generally use family labour) and wage labourers and agricultural serfs. In this paper an attempt has been made to present an analysis of the life and struggle of the peasantry in South Kanara during medieval and late medieval period. The

chief sources of information about social life in this period are inscriptions, Oral literature and Travelers account.

During the period between 1500 and 1800 A.D. South Kanara experienced rise and growth of a large number of major and minor

dynasties such as Vijayanagara, Keladi and a number of local chiefs. The region depicts existence of a large number of villages.

Here almost all classes of people owned and cultivated dry and wet paddy fields. Usually the landholders in the region owned paddy field intermixed with sandy land which was too barren to grow coconut palms. In the interior, the land-holders owned rice land intermixed with arecanut gardens. Though the agricultural activities affected the economy of all class of people the actual cultivation was done by the lowest caste people.

The Tulu Paddanas contains information about the manorial houses of the rich peasantry which was known as Bidus. In southern part of South Kanara ,Ballalas were recognized by the people as the dominant land owning class and they owned different forms of lands and supervised their cultivation. Further, the Paddanas speak of the Bidus that were surrounded by tenant's 'households who provided free labour on land lord's lands in return for cultivation rights. Panjurli Paddana refers to the Mardalla Ballala's Bidu¹ which was served by servants such as bondmen, contract labourers, farmer and watermen. These Alus lived in their respective huts and received food prepared in the Bidu. In another Paddana, we get information on the employment of labourers in the agrarian operations by landlords². Koti-Chennaya, who received Kambala Gadde from the Ballala, employed tenants for the cultivation of that field. Every one of the tenants who ploughed with buffaloes received three seers³ of rice and a leaf full of boiled rice. Similarly, the foreign travelogues testify the employment of hired labourers in the agricultural operations by the landlords. For instance, Della Valle noticed the employment of hired labourers in the lands of the Jogis at Kadri⁴. Similarly, hired labourers cultivated spacious valley around Bhatkalas known from Peter Mundy.⁵ Buchanan⁶, another English traveller, in 1800A.D. gave detailed information on the nature of hired labourers and their wages and the conditions of their work under their masters. According to a male servant gets two hanes of rice. They work from seven in the morning until five in the evening with a break of half hour at noon for the rest. In Karwar region, the same traveller observes: the sizes of the farm vary from one to five ploughs. Two oxen are required to each plough, which cultivates from five to seven candies of land. In general, the family proprietor labours the farm, but a few rich men employ hired

servants. Men servants get yearly from two to six Pagodas, but those, who got only the first sum in money, have daily one meal of rice.⁷

Landowning Ballalas and the middle peasants employed the agrarian, serfs known as Alus in their agrarian operations. Usually, the Alus belonged to the lowest caste people known as Holeyas, the Bakudas, Pambadas, Nalkes and Koragas⁸. They were regarded as the property of the landlords of the South Kanara. There were two classes of serfs known as Huttalu (hereditary serf) and Mannalu (serf attached to the soil and changed hand with it.) The epigraphs and Kadatas often mention the transfer of such serfs with the sale of land⁹. Regarding the nature of the agrarian serfs in South Kanara, we are indebted to the travelogue of Buchanan. He observes:

“A male slave is allowed daily 1 ½ Hany of rice or three fourths of the allowance for a hired servants; a women receives one Hany. The man gets 1 ½ Rupees worth of cloth, and two Rupees in cash; the women is allowed only the cloth. They also received trifling allowance of oil, salt and other seasonings. A small allowance is given to children and old people. When a slave wishes to marry he receives 5 pagodas to defray the expense. The wife works with the husband’s master. On the husband’s death, if the wife was a slave, all children belong to her mother’s master, but, if she was formerly free, she and all her children belong to her husband’s master... A good slave sells for 10 pagodas or about 4 Guineas. If he has wife who was formerly free, and two or three children, the value is doubled. The slave may be hired out, and finds him subsistence. Slaves are also mortgaged; but the mortgager is not obliged to supply the place of a slave that dies; and in the case of accidents, the debt becomes extinguished.

In the case of the Koragas, the traveller observes when their masters choose to employ them, they get one meal of victuals and men have daily one hane of rice and women three quarters of hane¹⁰. About the slaves working in the farm of the Brahmins in the Honnavar region, Buchanan says: (He) used to get daily 1½ Hany rice, a woman receives one Hany. Each gets yearly 2 ½ Rupees worth of cloth, and they are allowed to build a hut for themselves in the coconut garden. They have no other allowance and out of this pittance must support their infants and aged people. The women’s share is nearly 15 bushels, a year worth rather less 14 ½ Rupees

The rich peasant farmers particularly the Brahmins and the high caste sudras such as Nadavas or Bunts, Billavas and Mogavirs owned paddy fields, large areas of gardens of coconut, arecanut and other products. The wealth of these peasants was measured in terms of rice of Muras (Mudes) and yield from their gardens¹².

The Brahmins owned garden lands in the interior. Such garden land cultivation were done by the hired and slave labourers ¹³, but under the personal supervision of landed Brahman communities. Unlike in other regions of Karnataka, the Brahmins in the South Kanara had thorough knowledge of the agrarian operations¹⁴.

The plantations owned by other communities, namely the Jainas and the high caste Sudras usually depended upon the hired, the slave workers apart from their own labour. In many cases, the rich peasants depended upon the rents known as Geni from the tenants.

The rich peasants had manorial houses having many rooms, wide courtyard and Cowpens. The middle peasant's houses were considerably large and often had upper story. In front of the houses of the middle peasants the manoli (*cocoina indica*) creeper had been trained up a double pendal. The coconut tree bearing red fruit had a circular basin round it. Such descriptions of the middle peasant's houses are mentioned in the Tulu padadanas.¹⁵

However, the poor peasantry lived in small thatched huts. According to one of the Tulu Padadanas, the Koragas in the Adakanellinjine village lived in their sheds called Koppa, while the Bakudas lived on the plains ¹⁶. Similar descriptions of the dwellings of the poor peasants are mentioned in the travelogues as well. For instance, Barbosa says (the Koragas the agrarian serfs) dwell on the fields and open campaign in secret lurking places which folk of good castes never go save by mischance. ¹⁷ Linschoten, who passed through Kanara in 1583 A.D. observed that the poor peasantry dwell in little straw houses the doors whereof are so low, that men must creep in and out, their house hold stuffs in a mat upon the ground to sleep upon and a pit or hole in the ground to beat, their rice with a pot or two, to see that in and so they live and gain so much as it is a wonder¹⁸.

The rulers in South Kanara followed judicious benevolent policy with regard to the revenue administration which determined the relations between the rulers and the peasantry. Generally, the rulers encouraged the agriculturalists to maximize the produce from the land by advancing loans to them, by constructing and repairing tanks and embankments by encouraging them to cultivate the waste lands and above all, by remitting taxes partially or completely whenever the farmers were in loss due to the damages caused by natural calamities. The Vijayanagara rulers and their feudatories took prompt action against the officers who oppressed the cultivators.¹⁹ Those who extended the cultivation received active encouragement from the Government. The Nayakas of Keladi and the Sultans of Mysore continued the same policy and thus, worked for the betterment of the agriculturalists.²⁰

Although many historical records stress cooperation and interdependence between the peasantry and the government, there were a few instances of confrontations between the peasantry and the rulers. In these confrontations, the big peasantry took a leading role. They protested against the Government's policy of excessive collection of the revenue. Their protests often led to revolts which are described as political unrests. There were a few examples of the landlord's protests against the Government's taxation policy. A study of an inscription dated 1465 A.D. indicates that the landholders in the Nilavar village protested by referring to pay taxes to the Government angered by stern measures taken by Pandarideva, the Governor of the Barakuru rajya. Then epigraph states that Dannayaka Mahamandaleswara Ramachandra intervened and the matter was set right by fixing the revenue and ordered that the stipulated revenue had to be paid to the treasury²¹. Such instances occurred often in the South Kanara region under the Vijayanagara rule²². It is said that in 1606 A.D. the peasantry belonging to the Halepaika caste revolted against the queen of Gerasoppa and Sangitapura. This revolt was against the heavy imposition of taxes by the queen. The Halepaika peasants sought the help of Keladi Venkatappa Nayaka. The latter overthrew the queen with the support of the revolting Halepaikas²³. Further, Venkatappa Nayaka succeeded in consolidating his authority in the Northern portion of Kanara with the support of the low caste peasantry.

However, the revenue policy of Venkatappa Nayaka adversely affected the big landed gentry, namely the feudal chiefs in the South Kanara. For instance, the Jogis of Kadri who owned huge landed property were so much heavily taxed by Venkatappa that the former were driven to poverty. Similarly, Della Valle observed the miserable conditions of the peasantry in the Ghat region of Kollur. Their misery was due to the heavy taxation by the Government. The peasants in the Ghat region of Kollur paid very large tributes to the king so they had nothing but to labour for them and live in great poverty.²⁴

The landed gentry revolted against the Keladi authority when they heard of the death of Keladi Venkatappa in 1629 A.D. According to one of Portuguese records of 1629 A.D.²⁵ The kings, queens and the Ballalas engage him (Virabhadra) on different sides and have already blockaded the fortress of seruguo and had fortified all the passes of the Ghats to prevent help coming down so that from Canhoroto to Baticalle everything is in revolt.

Although the historians dubbed this revolt as ‘political unrests’ a critical study of the nature and causes of the revolt convinces us that it had an agrarian outlook. This is testified by the following points: all the feudal chiefs and the Ballalas, defeated by Keladi Venkatappa Nayaka, were landed gentries. Keladi Venkatappa Nayaka imposed heavy tributes on them, the tributes imposed by Venkatappa were so heavy that some of them were driven to poverty and even abandoned lands²⁶. They waited for an opportunity to overthrow the Keladi authority. But this revolt of big landlords failed because Keladi Virabhadra, successor of Venkatappa, was rich and those leagued against him were very poor²⁷. Further, it seems that the Halepaika landholders and cultivators, who assisted Venkatappa in consolidating the Keladi authority in the South Kanara, did not join the revolt. The subsequent revolts of the Tulu Palegars (huge landholders) against the Keladi authority were crushed by the Nayakas with the support of the peasants of the Halepaika caste. The latter gained prominence in the agrarian set up in the coastal region²⁸. One such Halepaika leader who supported Keladi authority in South Kanara in 1674 A.D. was Kasaragod Timmanna belonged to Toddy tapper’s family.

The landed gentry in the Keladi Kingdom again revolted when Keladi Virammaji imposed on them additional assessment of tax in 1758 A.D. But it was settled by compromise.

According to it, the peasants agreed to pay 50% in four years at the rate of 12 ½ each year²⁹. In the fifth year it was to have been remitted. But Haider who conquered the Keladi kingdom in 1763 made it permanent.

In the region of Tippu Sulthan, the big peasantry in South Kanara often revolted against the revenue policy of the Government. For instance, the Jangamas revolt in Karkala, Mulki and Padubidre were agrarian unrests caused by the taxation policy of the Sultan. The unrest in Kodagu against Tipu Sultan was also of the same category. When the Sultan granted lands to non-Kodagu peasants as Jagirs in that region in 1785 A.D., the deprived landholders in collusion with the Holeyas, the agrarian serfs of the region, revolted³⁰. But the Tippu Sultan crushed the revolts with great difficulty. Towards the end of the reign of the Sultan, the landlords abandoned the cultivation and fled. This was due to their inability to pay the increased taxes to the Government³¹.

There were a few instances of the tenant's discontentment during the period under study. In 1391 A.D., the tenants belonging to the caste of Devara Makkalu in the Kuduvalli village protested against the landlord, Narasimha Bhatta³². The tenants plundered the house of their master and carried off the food and other produce to their houses. It was in this context, Narasimha Bhatt, the landlord, sought the help of the Sringeri Pontiff. The latter settled the dispute between him and the tenants. The settlement was that the tenants rents were fixed based on the sowing capacity of land. The study of an inscription dated 1425 A.D gives an impression that the Purohitasthala in Kundapura was usurped by tenants. Then the Government intervened and restored the confiscated lands to the Purohitas after thorough enquiry with the consult of the Grama Jagatu (the association of the landed gentry). This enquiry was conducted by Pradani Narasimha Odeya, who was administering the Barakuru Rajya³³.

Tenants "discontentment also occurred in the Ghat and Malnad regions. For example, in the kingdom of Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagara, the village headmen and peasants of the Sringeri Matha protested against their Master, the Sringeri Pontiff. Then the Emperor settled the dispute. He gave strict instruction to the village headmen and peasants to obey the Pontiff of the Matha.³⁴ The tenants' unrests are also recorded in a few epigraphs from the Shimoga and

Chikkamangalur regions. An inscription dated 1577 A.D., states that the tenants in Heddase in Edenad seized the lands of the Agrahara and that they refused to the rents due to the master and enjoyed land without legal right. However, this dispute was settled by Keladi Ramaraja Nayaka³⁵.

The tenant's unrests and discontentment again occurred in the Sringeri, Karkala and Mangaluru regions between the years 1565 and 1658 A.D. For instance, an epigraph dated 1621 A.D., informs us that the tenant's of the Sringeri Matha refused to pay the due rents usurped the landed property and them into their private gardens. Further the epigraph also informs us that the tenants mortgaged the usurped lands with one another. Then the matter was settled by Keladi Venkatappa who restored the property to the Matha³⁶. In the kingdom of Keladi Sivappa Nayaka, the tenants residing in the Mangaluru and the neighborhood confiscated the lands of the Sringeri Matha. Then the Pontiff appealed to Sivappa. The latter in 1652 A.D., restored the lands to the Matha and ordered the tenants to pay the due rents to the Matha (*vakkalu karesi takitu madisi ya the sthithiyalli baha hindanavannu kodisi mundu kalakalakkukoduvahage kattu madisisuvudu*).³⁷

Within four years, the tenant's enmesh of the Sringeri Matha residing in the Karkala Hobali abandoned cultivation of the lands belonging to the Matha. When this was known to Keladi Sivappa, he sent Vengal Bhatt to enquire into the grievances of the tenants. In 1656 A.D. Venga Bhatta settled the grievances of the tenants by refixing their rents.

With an intention of avoiding conflict between the tenants and the landlords, a new device in the form of writing known as Edarunudi came into vogue. The edarunudi defined the agrarian relations between the landlords and the tenants. This was noticed by Buchanan in South Kanara towards the end of the eighteenth century.

References:

1. Indian Antiquity, XXVI, p.51; Saletore B.A, Ancient Karnataka, 1936, Poona, p .583. Bidu also means payment of money to manorial house.
2. Ibid, P.148; Saletore, Op.cit, p.527.
3. Seer is one form of rice measurement.
4. Edward. Grey (ed.), The Travels in India, Vol.II, p. 350.
5. The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia, Vol.III, pt I, p.99.
6. Buchanan, Vol.II. pp.227, 235, 239, 298-9, 326.
7. Ibid, pp.299, 326-7.
8. Ibid, p.271.
9. SII, IX, Pt.II, No.417.; Ibid, VII, No.365; EC,VI, KP, No.51.
10. Buchanan, Op.cit, pp.228, 271.
11. Ibid, 297-8.
12. IA, XXIII, p. 152, Saletore, Op.cit, p.527.
13. Buchanan, Op.cit, 298.
14. Ibid, 262, 323, 325-6, 336, 345; IA, XXII, P.48; Saletore, Op.cit, p.467.
15. IA, XXII, p.31; Saletore, Op.cit, pp.571, 576.
16. Ibid, XXIII, p.41; Saletore, Op.cit, p.461.
17. Duarte Barbosa“ The Book of Duarte Barbosa, An Account of the Countries..., London, Vol.II, P.68.
18. The Voyages of Huyghoten to East Indies, II, p.262.

19. Barbosa, Op.cit, I, p.209; SII, Vol.IX, Pt.II, No.441; KI, III, No.11, p.31.
20. Mohibul Hassan, Tipu Sultan, pp.337, 343.
21. ARSIE, 1929, No.495; Ramesh K.V, A History of South Kanara, P. 181.
22. SII, Vol.IX, Pt.II, No.459; ARSIE, 1929, No.494.
23. Buchanan, Op.cit, p. 316.
24. Della Valle, Op.cit, II, p.296, 249-51.
25. Heras H, The expansion of wars of Venkatappa Nayaka of Ikkeri, PIHRC, XI, P.111-12.
26. Ibid. p.108-111; Della Valle, Op.cit, II, P.212, 285, 286, 314, 315, 348, 353; Sturrock, South Kanara, Vol.I, pp. 96-98.
27. PIHRC XI, P.111-12.
28. Buchanan, Op.cit, II, P.239.
29. Chitnis K.N, Keladi Polity, P.140.
30. Munro Report Dated 31st May 1800, Para 13. Hayavadhana Rao, History of Mysore, Vol.III, p. 679, 683; Krishna D.N, Kodagina Ithihasa, PP.160, 170, 183-185.
31. Buchanan, Op.cit, II, p.225, 230, 272, 273.
32. EC, Vol.VI, Cm.88.
33. SII, Vol.IX, Pt.II, No.441.
34. Shivanna, K.S, The Agrarian system of Karnataka, P.32.
35. EC, VIII, SB, No. 475, p.213.
36. Ibid, Vol.VI, Sg. No.5, p.351-52,
37. Ibid, Sg, No.5, p.363.