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PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

(Felicitation Volume in Honour of Dr. K.K.N. Kurup)

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LAND REVENUE SYSTEM AND AGRARIAN RELATIONS IN SOUTH KANARA (1799-1862)

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This paper analyses the land revenue administration and the resultant agrarian relations in the region of South Kanara from 1799 to 1862. Sir Thomas Munro was appointed as the first Collector of the region and the land revenue system that he introduced was 'ryotwari' in character. The British annexation of the region had destroyed certain old elements - political, economic and social- which figured in the agrarian system of the pre-annexation period. The Munro System of administration resulted in the emergence of new agrarian relations in South Kanara. The first part of the paper deals with the land revenue system and the agrarian relations form the content of the second part.

I

Munro's land revenue system in South Kanara may be better understood against the background of the revenue assessment that prevailed just before his arrival there. The period of the Mysore Sultans - Haidar Ali (1763-1782) and Tipu Sultan (1782-1799)- witnessed an increased extraction of revenue from South Kanara. The result was that the total revenue collected by the State from Kanara swelled to Pagodas 5,33,202 (Rs. 18,66,207) per year in the early 1780s (the amount increased was Pagodas 2,19,195, for it was only Pagodas 3,14,007 during 1762-63). A similar course was pursued by Tipu and the total government demand from the whole province of Kanara during his period amounted to Pagodas 8,68,678 (Rs.30,40,373). Out

of this the actual revenue realised was Pagodas 6,16,089 (Rs.21,56,311,50) the rest of the amount falling in arrears¹. This revenue enhancement made the local chieftains of Kumbhla and Vittal to support the British in the Anglo-Mysore wars against Haidar and Tipu. Further, the enhancement was uneven in character. In fact, Wellesley and Sir Thomas Munro have borne witness to the prosperity of the Mysore dominions at the time of its conquest by the British. But the position in respect of Malabar was unfortunately very different². There it resulted in the impoverishment of agriculture due to heavy taxation. South Kanara too had an experience similar to that of Malabar. Francis H. Buchanan in 1801 gave a very grim picture of agriculture and the condition of the peasants in the District. He allude to the dissertation of villages in Belthangadi and Karkal³. In other words, South Kanara along with Malabar was treated by the Sultans as almost like 'internal colonies'. Sir Thomas Munro gave a very bleak picture of the condition of South Kanara in 1799-1800. He opined that Haidar had regarded the agriculture of South Kanara as a fund from which he might draw without limit for the expenses of his military operations in other quarters. He said, "had such an assessment as that introduced by Haidar and Tipu existed in ancient times Kanara would long ago have been converted into a desert"⁴.

The salient feature of Munro's land revenue policy was the acceptance of the existing institutions as he found them. Munro was much impressed by the system of private property that was deep rooted in the region⁵. To him lands in South Kanara constituted a sort of private property more ancient and probably more perfect than that of England⁶. As noted already, private property manifested itself in the form of *mulawarg* in the region. The High Court of Bombay said of the *mulgar* (*mulawargadar*) of Kanara that "he enjoys an hereditary and transferable property in the soil and cannot be ousted so long as he pays the revenue assessed on his land"⁷. H.H. Wilson, in his Glossary says: "in Karnata (Kannada) *mulawarga* signifies an ancestral hereditary estate, and that *mulawarga* means original proprietary right in land..."⁸ Although this system had suffered damage from the op-

pression and exactions of both Haidar and Tipu, it was still cherished and valued by the people. Munro's policy was not to supersede the existing system by a new one, but to restore and strengthen it⁹. Munro may also have thought that it would help him win the good-will of the natives. The Utilitarian philosophy might also have influenced him. He could not find here the allodial gentry which the introduction of the permanent settlement on the Bengal model required¹⁰. Before Munro left Kanara, he received orders from the Madras Government to submit proposals for the introduction of the Bengal model in South Kanara¹¹. But Munro was opposed to such an arrangement. He argued that in South Kanara, where almost all land was private property, where there were more title-deeds; and where the validity of these deeds had probably stood more trials than all the estates in England, great proprietors could not be established without annihilating all the rights of the then existing landlords¹². According to Munro "to think of dividing Canara into great estates would only be attempting to carry it backwards a century or two, and forcing it from that state to which it must again inevitably return¹³. Munro wanted to introduce a revenue system which would suit the local conditions.

The revenue system which Sir Thomas Munro recommended for South Kanara was in its leading principles 'ryotwari' in character¹⁴. His 'minor belief' was that the name of the landlord belonged to the rayat (ryot or cultivator)¹⁵. It was a settlement with the actual landowners, the holders for the most part of small estates or *wargs*, who paid the assessment direct to the government, without the intervention of any middlemen in the shape of rentiers or zamindars. The settlement was made, in many cases, not with the actual cultivator, but with the proprietor of land (*mulawargadar*). He, in turn, used to let out a portion of his land to a tenant or tenants (on the basis of *mulageni* or *chalageni* or *vaidegeni* tenures), from whom he received rent¹⁶. The assessment was laid upon each estate or *warg*, in the aggregate. The assessment was based on the *bijawari*¹⁷ system of land measurement and not on any scientific survey and measurement of land.

Munro's conception of the ryot is debatable. It is generally recognised that to Munro, the term 'ryots' certainly did not include agricultural labourers, but on the other hand, it is unlikely that he intended it to cover absentee landlords¹⁸. K.K.N. Kurup, after studying the land ownership and agrarian system in the Kasaragod (old Bekal) Taluk, during the period in question says: the ideal ryot of Munro was nothing but a land monopolist or zamindar who possessed thousands of acres of land and remained an absentee landlord¹⁹. In the words of Neil Charlesworth "in the strictest ryotwari system, it was sometimes difficult to recognise the appropriate level of cultivating right and any indigenous elites, in practice, were probably able to preserve extensive powers in many villages"²⁰. In the case of the ryotwari system introduced in South Kanara, the assessment was made on those who held a proprietary right or *mulawarga* title over the land irrespective of whether or not they took to actual cultivation. Some of the assesses were very rich and commanded hundreds of acres of land while some others cultivated their own small pieces of land. In all cases, however, the basis of assessment was the title to land. To Munro, 'Rayet' (Ryot or Raiyat) designated any person who engaged to cultivate and pay revenue on government land. As Munro explained to the President of the Board of Control in London in 1823, the designation 'rayet' applied to any individual "whether the public assessment on his land be ten rupees or ten thousand"²¹.

Notwithstanding his definite views on the impropriety of the assessments of the Mysore rulers, Munro, in making the first land revenue settlement of South Kanara under British administration, did not depart widely from the system which he found established in the region. He made no other reduction in the assessment of Tipu Sultan beyond such as was absolutely necessary to ensure the collection of the rest of the revenue²². Further he never introduced any major change in the method of revenue assessment and collection. One significant change that he introduced was the collection of revenue only in cash, and when the assessment was too high, it had a serious implication of introducing a wide net work of money economy leading to the emer-

gence of merchant moneylenders in a basically agrarian economy. It also resulted in severe hardships to the poorer ryots. Munro considered himself a Collector, who was to investigate into and report on the state of the country but who was to leave to the Board of Revenue the decision of lowering its assessment²³. He held that as land was the object of numberless disputes or contention, there was no absolute necessity for reducing any part of the assessment²⁴. Munro said: "I have preserved them (land revenue) as nearly as possible as they were under the Government of Hyder and Tippoo. I have no-where raised them and I have lowered them only where I was convinced that they could not otherwise be realised"²⁵. Still Munro had desired that caution might be observed in imposing any new assessment on lands that paid the Bidanur rent and half of Haidar's addition; that no addition should be laid on land that paid the Bidenur and three-fourth of Haidar's assessment; on land which might be raised to the Bidanur and half of Haidar's assessment should ever be raised higher, wherever land revenue, either through fraud or favour, had been reduced below the Bidanur assessment, it should be raised to that level together with half of Haidar's additions, but no more should be demanded²⁶. These words show how Munro was conforming to the familiar British colonial policy in India of exacting the maximum amount of land revenue, though he had to make some reductions from the revenue collected formerly by Tipu Sultan.

The land revenue of the whole province of Kanara and Soonda for the *Fusly* (crop or revenue year) 1209, or A.D. 1799-1800, amounted to Star Pagodas 4,54,643 (or Rs.15,91,250.50) and that of South Kanara to Star Pagodas 2,70,593 (or Rs.9,47,075)²⁷. Thus Munro's settlement of the whole Province was Star Pagodas 20,434 (or Rs.71,519) less than that of Tipu. This settlement, Munro observed, was on the same extent of land, nearly as high as Haidar's was at any time, and higher than Tipu's collections were, except during a few years in the early part of his reign²⁸.

As per the assessment of Munro, the landlords (*wargadars*) appropriated 38% to 73% of their gross produce, and the *Sirkar* assess-

ment varied from 27% to 62% of the gross produce²⁹. It must be remarked that most of the landlords were also the cultivators of the land and enjoyed advantages from the ryot's share. After six months of his experience in South Kanara, Munro reported that the information he obtained had induced him to think that a smaller abatement in the land revenue would suffice. Accordingly, he abandoned his recommendations of a hard and fast rule of fixing the assessment at the Bidanur *shist* plus a certain per-centage of the Mysore additions. He stated that many other points demanded as much attention as the *shist* which was probably extremely unequal originally and had been rendered more so by the falsification of accounts, and expressed the opinion that no guide was so sure as collection³⁰. In order to give a new impetus to agriculture he thought it necessary to recommend certain reductions, varying as regards South Kanara, from 12% to 37%. It was done with the object of bringing down the assessment to not more than half the net produce of the land³¹. Alexander Read, who succeeded Munro as the Collector of Kanara in October 1800, expressed his opinion that the Government demand should be limited, generally to 30% of the gross produce³².

Though Munro left Kanara in 1800, the revenue system introduced by him continued later with only minor changes. On the basis of the average revenue collected for seventeen years, the government introduced the *Tharao* (fixed, determined) or *Sarasari* (average) assessment in *Fusly* 1229 or A.D. 1819-20. However, it did not help the ryots in anyway. Over assessment, inequality in assessment and revenue arrears continued as earlier. There was revision in revenue assessment in 1834-35 and it failed to achieve its objectives. It was only in the late 1840s and 1850's that the Government thought seriously about the proper survey of land and revenue settlement based on such a survey. However, it merely remained as a pious wish of the Government for many years to come. In 1859-60, the Collector referred to the use of coercion on ryots to make their payments³³.

II

The Company Government introduced several administrative changes in South Kanara. They destroyed certain old elements - political, economic and social. The *Rajas* of Nileshwar, Kumbha and Vittal were put down by the British in their pacification campaign, and were reduced to the position of Zamindars. Village affairs were controlled by persons who held the title of a headmen by local custom³⁴. Earlier these village headmen used to play a crucial role in the field of revenue collection, and used to act as arbitrators in settling the village disputes. Such local headmen became less important with the introduction of the British revenue administration and appointment of village officials. Further, the introduction of the British judicial system minimised their importance as settlers of disputes.

In the field of land revenue administration there was a remarkable change with the introduction of the 'Ryotwari' system by Munro in 1799-1800. The institution of private property was recognised by the British and each ryot was given a *patta*. But, all the ryots of South Kanara were not ryots in the real sense of the term. They included zamindars, rich peasants, poor peasants and landless labourers. Since the class of ryots included ryots of the stature of zamindars, they used to lease out their land for cultivation. The system of letting out land for cultivation became crucial in forming the agrarian system and relations of the people.

Another important change introduced by the British was the collection of revenue only in cash. Besides these changes, what was more significant and affected the agrarian system and relations was the high extraction of revenue from the land and also from other sources. It led to land revenue arrears, rise of moneylenders, confiscation of property by the Government, transfer of property from the hands of the poor to the rich, and in brief the impoverishment of agriculture and the peasantry.

In theory, the share of the Government was 30% of the gross produce, but in practice it went up to 50% of it or sometimes even

more than that. The factors of over assessment and inequality in assessment were glaring³⁵. It is important to note that since 1820 the *jummabundy* price of crops, for example, rice was more than the market price. Because of this, the ryots had to sell more quantity of crops to realise cash and pay the Governmental revenue.

These shortcomings were noted repeatedly by different Collectors. But none of them took any effective measure to combat these evils of the revenue system. Generally, the result was that a large number of peasants fell in arrears to the Government. The lands of such peasants were publicly auctioned and the amount of revenue due was realised. This led to the creation of a new set of *wargadars*, who paid a relatively higher amount of revenue to the Government. This was one of the ways by which large scale transfer of property ownership took place.

Another form of transfer of land was from the hands of the ryots to those of the merchant moneylenders. The new landlords, moneylenders and administrative officials, who had close links with the British bureaucracy, saw to it that the British revenue and judicial administration favoured them. The newly emerged groups like landed Brahmins, Bunts and merchants established themselves as a complex layer of adept and influential manipulators between the Company, that is, the administration and the peasantry³⁶. In 1826, A.F. Hudleston, the Sub Collector of Kanara, reported about such fraudulent contrivances of the *Magane Shanboques* in South Kanara, who exploited the ignorance of the peasants by substituting sale deeds for mortgage lands, obtained their signatures and cheated them³⁷. More disastrous than the manipulations made by these native revenue officials in the revenue accounts was the unholy alliance between these officials and the local merchant moneylender. It is stated that even as early as 1826, during the *jummabundy*, the village revenue official was followed by the merchant moneylenders and when the former insisted the impoverished ryots to pay their *kists*, the latter suggested the ryots to make use of the loan which he was ready to offer³⁸. Some

of the merchant moneylenders were also revenue officials. Sometimes, the rich *mulwargadars* or *zamindars* themselves played the role of a moneylender.

When the ryots fell in arrears to the Government they mortgaged their land to the moneylenders and borrowed loans. It was known as *bogiadhi adavu* or *bogiadhi* or living mortgage or *aruwar*. The rate of interest that the moneylenders charged varied from 6% to 12% per year³⁹. Another kind of mortgaging was prevalent in the region. It was the system of fore-stalling the future crop, against the sum borrowed even before the seed from which it was to spring was put on the ground. It was called *torradhoo* or *toradoovoo* or dead mortgage. Its result was that the unfortunate peasant was pressed down by the rich grain merchant, and derived no advantage from any rise in the price of his produce, which went to the mortgagee (the merchant or the zamindar), who allowed only such a share to the peasant which enabled him to prevent his family from starving⁴⁰. When once the ryots came under grip of the native moneylenders, they could never free themselves from them, till they sold their land to the moneylenders. From the 1830's onwards, this kind of sale or transfer of property ownership became common in South Kanara, which ensured that the property of the poorer peasants passed into the hands of the richer peasants or zamindars and moneylenders.

The agrarian relationship that existed between the *mulawargadars* and their tenants, was also not conducive to the development of agriculture and the economy. Among the various systems of sub-tenures, the most common was that of *chalageni*, in which the revenue share of the *mulawargadar* was the highest, and the tenure of the *chalagenidar* was not safe. The *mulawargadar* had the right to enhance his share and the *chalagenidar's* position was much weaker than that of the *mulagenidar*. In *vaidegeni* tenure also the position of the *vaidegenidar* was weak and the *mulawargadar* could assert his will in deciding his share of the produce from land. Since *mulageni* was a permanent and hereditary system of letting out land for culti-

vation, where there was no scope for the *mulawargadar* to enhance his share, the system was preferred least by the rich *mulawargadars* or zamindars, particularly during the post- 1814 period. The share of the *mulagenidar* was about 50% of the gross produce and that of the *chalagenidar* ranged from 40% to 50% of the gross produce⁴¹. These insecure systems of leasing out land for cultivation exploded the myth of 'Peasant Proprietorship' (implied in the Ryotwari system) as a viable alternative to the Zamindari Settlement⁴².

Besides these popular systems of leasing out land for cultivation, there prevailed the systems of *walawargadar* and *kudutaledar*. *Walawargadar* meant a subordinate land owner who bought his land from the *wargadar* for which there was no separate *Patta* and paid his revenue to the *wargadar*.

If the land bought by the *Walawargadar* was separately registered, then his position was more safe. In both *walawargadar* and *kudutaledar* systems of land ownership, there was enough scope for misunderstanding and friction between the *mulawargadar* and *Walawargadar* and also between the *Mulawargadar* and the *kudutaledar*. In the same way if the land bought by the *kudutaledar* from the *mulawargadar* was registered in the village registers, then the former's position was safe. If it was unregistered, the *kudutaledar's* land also would be occupied by the government, if there was any due on the land owned by the *mulawargadar*, from whom he bought his land, for, the *patta* for the sold land and the unsold land was one and the same and possessed by the *mulawargadar*, in his name. Further, in this system on the sale of a portion of the *warg* by a *wargadar* to the *kudutaledar*, a sum was also fixed in the sale deed as the proportionate revenue of the portion sold. In such a case, the *kudutaledar* used to pay his share of the revenue direct to the Government, and not through the *wargadar*. It is not known whether this practice was prevalent in the system of *walawargadar*⁴³. So the difference between the two systems if there was any, remains unidentified.

Apart from the *mulawargadars* and various types of tenure holders there was the class of agricultural labourers which consisted of the *kulivalugalu* and *muladalugalu*. The available documents reveal that their life was very hard and miserable as in most other parts of British India.

The land revenue administration, thus resulted in the impoverishment of agriculture and also the ryots. The absence of the systems of Government loan and irrigation made their plight worse. The peasants, failing to bear the brunt of the new administrative and revenue systems, broke out in primary resistance movements in 1810-11 and again in 1830-31. Over assessment resulted in land revenue arrears which in turn led to confiscation and auctioning of land and also transfer of land ownership. The rich ryots grew as zamindars. A new class of zamindars and merchant moneylenders emerged in the region.

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Note: Add 590 to convert the *Fusly* into Christain Era.

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