

**RECONSTRUCTING THE SOCIAL HISTORY
OF SOUTH KANARA
A STUDY OF THE SAHYĀDRI KHANDA**

by

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In the attempt to analyze certain portions of the *Sahyadri Khanda* our main concern is on the relevance of this supposedly Puranic work in the reconstruction of the social history of South Kanara since the *Sahyadri Khanda* contains a rich variety of details relating also to other regions on the western coast of India. A brahmanical work in its composition, it naturally suffers from the limitations of all brahmanical works. Limitations apart, there are certain interesting details which make this study worthwhile. A comparison with other brahmanical traditions of the region becomes necessary due to the availability of similar details revealing certain common motifs.

The *Sahyadri Khanda* claims to be a part of the *Skanda Purana*. There are several versions of *Sahyadri Khanda*. For our present analysis we shall take the printed version edited by Gerson Da Cunha in 1877, which, as the editor himself says, is based on nearly fourteen manuscripts.¹

Since the *Sahyadri Khanda* claims to be a Puranic work a brief note on the nature of the Puranas is advisable. The Puranas, in general, claim to deal with the evolution of the universe, the recreation of the

1. J. Gerson Da Cunha, *Sahyadri Khanda Skanda Puranantargata*, (Bombay, 1877). Kota Sankaranarayana Karanta quotes from Da Cunha and mentions Kota version and Chempi version from South Kanara. Cfr. Ko.Sa.Karanta, *Kuta Maha Jagattu*, (Saligrama, 1958), pp.i-ii.

universe from its constituent elements, the genealogies of gods and seers and the history of royal families.² We can identify two kinds of Puranas: Ancient and Later. Ramachandra Dikshitar says that the classification of the eighteen Puranas marks a definite stage in the evolution of Puranic literature. To give them an air of antiquity, so as to make them acceptable, the redactors of the extant Puranas did not ignore the ancient materials and tried as far as possible to incorporate them in as much as they suited their purpose.³ According to tradition, there are eighteen Maha-Puranas and eighteen Upa-Puranas. The Upa-Puranas are much later productions, of a sectarian character and purely of local interest.⁴ It is generally found that, with the passage of time, new materials were added to the Puranas. This was done to facilitate and legitimate certain social and economic needs. This aspect makes it particularly difficult to locate the Puranas in their chronological sequence.⁵

The local Puranas utilized the typical details in the larger Puranas. This explains the correspondence between certain topographical references in the *Sahyadri Khanda* with topographical details found in larger Puranas like *Brahmanda-Purana*, *Vayu-Purana*, *Markandeya-Purana* and *Matsya-Purana*.⁶ An analysis of the *Sahyadri Khanda* will reveal its purpose and function and we shall proceed to give a summary of its contents. Here we are interested only in those sections which provide significant details regarding the Brahmanas of South Kanara.⁷

The sixth chapter (*Prthvidana Prasamsa*) mentions that Parasurama, after killing the Ksatriyas twenty-one times, donated land to Kasyapa,

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2. V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, "The Puranas: A Study," in Narendra Nath Law (ed.), *The Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol.VII-4, (Delhi, 1985), p.751.
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. *Ibid*, p.755.
 5. Kunal Chakrabarti, "Text and Traditions: The Making of Bengal Puranas", in R. Champakalakshmi and S. Gopal (eds.), *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology - Essays in Honour of Romila Thapar*, (Delhi, 1996), p.56.
 6. D. C. Sircar, "The Text of Puranic List of Rivers," in Narendra Nath Law (ed.), *The Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol.XXVII-3 (Delhi, 1985), pp.215-238
 7. Gerson Da Cunha (ed), *Op.Cit.*, pp.323-387.

Vasistha and other great sages. He was advised by Narada to create a piece of land for himself by driving away the sea with the use of an arrow. He accordingly stood on top of the Sahyadri and asked Samudra (sea) to send all the animals to the eastern sea so that their lives may be preserved when he used an arrow to create land out of the sea. On the land created by sending the sea backwards, Bhargava created two *gramas*. This place, which is the lower part of the Sahyadri, consists of several *Janapadas* and this place came to be known as Banavalli. It was divided into Kerala, Tulanga, Saurashtra, Konkana, Karahata, Karahata and Barbara and these divisions came to be known as Sapta Konkana.

The Brahmanas like Karnata, Maharashtra, Tailanga, Gurjara, Kanyakubja, Cittaputa, Payosniti, those born in Aryavarta, Kanci, Kausala, Saurashtra, Devarashtra, Indukacca and Madhyama Brahmanas on the banks of river Kaveri, Brahmanas of Abhira, Dravida, Daksinapatha, Avanti, Magadha and Brahmanas from Ahiksetra and also Brahmanas with the name Citpavana were given land donations. After instructing these Brahmanical groups that they could call him whenever they faced any trouble, Parasurama went to Mahendra hill. The Brahmanas decided to test Parasurama by calling him and he immediately responded by appearing before them. He became angry on knowing their real intention and he cursed them that they should lead a very hard life. Let the Sudras give *dana* when the Brahmanas ask for it, let the Ksatriyas consider them as *dutas* - thus cursing them Parsurama went back to the Mahendra hill.

In the seventh chapter (*Parshurama Kshetrotpattih*), there is a re-narration of Parasurama creating land by sending the sea backwards, but this time, not with the help of an arrow but by throwing his axe. He came to the Sahya hills from where he saw the sea and asked Samudra Raja to give him some land. By throwing his axe, he made the sea move backwards. Since the land contained no Brahmanas, he converted the fishermen into Brahmanas by investing them with the sacred thread. Thus here we have a typical case of brahmanization of the local folk. Parasurama instructed them to call him whenever they were in danger. The Brahmanas wishing to test Parasurama called him. He came and, on realizing their motive, he cursed them to become equal to the Sudras. He then retired to the Mahendra hill to do penance there.

After some time Mayura Varma, belonging to Surya Vamsa, became the King of this region. He brought Brahmanas from his own country Ahicchatra and gave them thirty-two *gramas*. In the eighth Chapter, we find that Mayura Varma, the son of Hemanga Raya, bestowed due respect on the good Brahmanas whom he had brought from Ahikshetra and made them settle in thirty-two villages. Here we get a list of the villages given by Parashurama to the Brahmanas:

Kadamba Kanana	3 villages
Gokarna	4 villages
On the banks of Suktimati	2 villages
On the southern bank of Sita	4 villages
Near Anantesa	10 villages
On the northern bank of Netravati	9 villages
Gajapuri-Narasimha	1 (Kuta village)

The nine villages on the northern bank of the River Netravati were given by Parasurama to *Srottri* Brahmanas who were engaged in the worship of Siva, Visnu and Ganapati. Due to the invasion of Kalki, Mayura Varma transferred all his powers to the ministers. The Brahmanas went back to Ahicchatra. The emergence of Kalki corresponds to the age of crisis narrated in the larger Puranas. During this time, the Brahmanas, who had come from Gorastra started living on the outskirts of these villages. Chandrangada, the son of Mayura Varma, came to know about the return of the Brahmanas to their homeland and he went to Ahicchatra and requested them to come to his country. He accordingly created the villages in two divisions as follows:

Western Gramas	Number of Households	Eastern Gramas	Number of Households
Kareruru	4	Sripadi	5
Varkadi	8	Kaundila	2
Marane	2	Karamuru	2
Kanavi	2	Ujjaya	16
Padigrama	4	Kattumarga	8
Vodila	4	Chirkodi	Not mentioned
Maghava	4	Vaminjuru	2

Mittanadu	7	Puragrama	4
Nirumarga	7	Ballamanja	3
Sit̥mantura	9	Hainadu	4
Sivabeli	30	Ichuka	6
Ajapuri	8	Keminje	1
Nilavara	8	Palinje	2
Skandapura	2	Saripadi	5
—	—	Kodipadi	7

This Chapter mentions that the eastern households number, without any doubt, 37. The western households number 206. The details would be of help to reconstruct the history of the Brahmana settlements in South Kanara. The exogamous *gotra* system of the Brahmanas facilitated the process of brahmanization of some non-brahmanical groups.

In the ninth Chapter, there are details about Krodha Muni, who worshipped Sankara and Srisa and created a *tirtha* and a *grama* in his own name. Parasurama, on his way to Gokarna, saw Mahendra hill and on coming down, he saw Tuludesa. Going towards the west, on the banks of the Suktimati river, he saw nine depressed women who requested him to protect them. They revealed that they were daughters of *Srottris* and that they had lost their husbands at an early age. Parasurama took them to Krodesa and told them to stay there for some time. He then went to Gokarna.

The tenth Chapter narrates that these nine women gave birth to sons called Golakas (i.e. those who are born after the death of their fathers). For their livelihood, they depended on agricultural activities and other such activities, which were supposed to be done only by Sudras. They again approached Parasurama who assured them of his help. A Brahmana called Somapithi made them take bath in the Suktimati and gave their families different names such as Gasila, Kanata, Vaidya, Anichatara, Heramba, Arayala, Edala, Komagihemna and Kalkura.

These nine families were made to settle in five villages. Their *gotra* is Atri. In the Sahyadri valley, there is a garden of Golakas who are termed as fallen Brahmanas in this Chapter. They are expected not to mingle with other Brahmanas. Thus here we have a situation where there is stratification within a single *varna*.

The 11th Chapter refers to another fallen *grama* on the banks of the Suktimati river. This *grama* was given to the Brahmanas by the Sudras. In earlier times, there were Sudra kings, by the name of Madhwa and Kanda, who had great respect for the Brahmanas. During their reign, eight Brahmanas came to this area and with the intention of acquiring money, they praised the Sudra kings and succeeded in obtaining much wealth. They lived there for twelve years. While they were there, the younger of the two kings desired to remarry. As part of the wedding procession, he requested the Brahmanas to carry him on a palanquin which had eight legs. The Brahmanas agreed to this and in return, they obtained all the comforts of life. When they returned to the village, they had to face the anger of the other Brahmanas who wanted to hit them. They ran away to the Sudra king and pleaded for his protection. He gifted a *grama*, as also his own wife, whom he had recently married, to the Brahmanas in the Narasimha temple. Since these Brahmanas had served the Sudras and had accepted their gifts, they became fallen Brahmanas.

The 12th Chapter narrates the story of another fallen *grama* near Kotilingesvara and it is said that the people of this *grama* speak falsehood. There was a conflict between the Kotesvara Brahmanas and those who lived on the bank of the Suktimati regarding the ownership of some land. The king, Vasu Chakravarti, decided to give a right judgement. The Kotesvara Brahmanas adopted a cunning method by digging up the land and hiding a man there who was expected to announce that the land belonged to the Koteswara Brahmanas. The Kotesvara Brahmanas were hence cursed to become fallen Brahmanas.

The 15th chapter refers to the fallen Brahmanas on the banks of Chakra river. These were created by Parasurama. They were ignorant of the Vedas and were eating non-vegetarian food. Mayura Varma kept them in a place called Valabhi and gave other *gramas* to the good Brahmanas. When the fallen Brahmanas questioned this action of Mayura Varma, he gave them four *gramas*: Kudalaka, Padika, Matti and Naga.

Other Chapters refer to other fallen brahmanical groups who had arrived from various regions like Gorastra and Northern India. The 21st Chapter gives the story of Mahalingesa on the banks of the Suktimati river and mentions various *tirthas* like Agasthya, Vasistha, Kanva, Galava, Gautama, Bharadhwaja, Angirasa and Vamadeva. This Chapter also refers to rivers like Suktimati, Kubja, Ketaki, Chakrini, Sauparneya.

The above survey of the contents of some Chapters of the Sahyadri Khanda indicates that the Brahmana groups that had migrated from outside of South Kanara had to face a stiff competition from those brahmanical groups who had already established themselves on the fertile tracts of west coast. The Brahmana settlements can be found on the river banks which also indicates that they had realized the economic value of the fertility of soil there. They all desired the ownership of this land. This led to competition among the different brahmanical groups. The technique of the Puranic tradition came in handy to denigrate the social position of the migratory groups. The differences in the cultural patterns among the different brahmanical groups also made the natives look at the strange food habits of the migrants with hostility. For instance, consumption of fish is not a taboo for the Brahmanas on the eastern coast (Bengal), while this is unusual in the case of the Brahmanas of South Kanara and Kerala. This resulted in a differentiation among the brahmanical groups themselves giving rise to the stories about the fallen Brahmanas. Here the notion of pollution also assumes prime importance. In the case of ancient India, we have the reference to Vratya Ksatriyas, who had a degraded position in society.⁸ It is also possible that this work was written after the 15th century when we find references to the indulgence of Brahmanas in agricultural pursuits. There was need for an explanation of this violation of the *Dharma-Shastra* norm that Brahmanas should not engage in physical labour. This explains the stories of the fallen Brahmanas. This also explains why there are no stories of fallen Brahmanas regarding the Sivalli and Kota Brahmanas who appear to be the dominant brahmanical groups in the region.

Apart from the text or texts in Sanskrit, there is a *Sahyadri Khanda* in the Kannada language as well.⁹ It concentrates on giving list of *tirtha ksetras* and narrating *Sthalapuranas*. According to its editor, Y. C. Bhanumati, the Kannada *Sahyadri Khanda* has no similarities with the Sanskrit *Sahyadri Khanda*.¹⁰ She says that the original version of the Kannada *Sahyadri Khanda* must have been a different work which is not available now.¹¹ But this Kannada version of the *Sahyadri Khanda*

8. Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State* (Delhi, 1990), p.51.

9. Y. C. Bhanumati (ed), *Sahyadri Khanda* (Mysore, 1984).

10. *Ibid*, p.151.

11. *Ibid*, p.152.

also claims that it is a part of the *Skanda Purana* and here we find the importance given to Puranic details. There is also a reference to the creation of land by Parasurama. It does not however mention Mayura Varma. But it gives a list of different *tirthas*, some of which are also mentioned in the Sanskrit *Sahyadri Khanda*.

The Kannada *Sahyadri Khanda* mentions places like Anga-desa, Arunacala, Avanti, Amalaka, Kakudagiri, Kasmiri, Kundinipura, Kaivartaka, Kotisvara, Kodyasrama, Gajaksetra, Gokarna, Trigartadesa, Dakshinavarta, Durgeshvara-ksetra, Dvaravati, Dhvajapura, Pandya desa, Brahmagiri, Brahmapura, Bhaganda-ksetra, Madhupura, Maharashtra, Rajatagiri, Vasupura, Vatesvara, Vanavasi, Venkatacala, Velavana, Sahyadri, Sahyamalaka, Salagrama, Sunandakagrama, Subrahmanya and Syananduru. It is possible to identify some of these places in South Kanara itself.

In the Sanskrit *Sahyadri Khanda*, there is a direct reference to the Madhwa saints and their proselytizing activities with regard to the fallen Brahmanas. The Vaisnava *mathas* pursued an aggressive policy of trying to bring the different Brahmanical groups within the Madhwa tradition. This policy is also reflected in the wide tours conducted by Madhwacharya not only in South Kanara but also in other parts of the west coast like Goa.

When viewed from the angle of modern historical methodology, we may find an unusual way of expressing the observations regarding the social changes that were taking place in the those contemporary times. This text takes into consideration not only South Kanara but also other parts of Parasurama-ksetra, like North Kanara, as a place of migration of Brahmanas from outside territories.

When the *Sahyadri Khanda* is studied in the context of the *Skanda Purana*, as one of the eighteen Puranas, one can easily identify some discrepancies. A linguistic study of this text will reveal that large parts of it are later additions and interpolations. But apart from these limitations of a Puranic text, the *Sahyadri Khanda* can prove very useful to identify the groups that migrated to South Kanara as also to observe the attempts of one group to establish its authority over the others.

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