

SAUNDARYASHRI:

Studies of Indian History, Archaeology, Literature & Philosophy
(Festschrift to Professor Anantha Adiga Sundara)

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SHARADA PUBLISHING HOUSE
DELHI

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First Published 2009

© P. Chenna Reddy (b. 1959)

ISBN: 978-81-88934-61-4 (Set)

Rs. 13,800.00 (5 Vol. Set)

Published by:

Anjana Bansal

SHARADA PUBLISHING HOUSE

111, Vidya Vihar Apartment

Sector-9, Rohini, Delhi-110 085 (INDIA)

Ph.: +91-11-3292 1560, 2755 2102

E-mail: bansal_sph@rediffmail.com

Website: www.sharadabooks.com

Printed at:

Salasar Imaging Systems

Delhi

Agricultural Labour in Dakshina Kannada

N. Syam Bhat

The importance of labour and its role in agricultural production cannot be ignored by historians and scholars writing on socio-economic history. The labourer, whether he was temporary or permanent, had played a significant and historic role in agricultural production. The condition of the labourer, his position and the relations that he had in the context of ownership of land and production on land have already formed an inseparable part of studies on agrarian system and relations. However, the publications on the history of Dakshina Kannada (one of the three coastal districts of Karnataka) have not adequately covered the nature and role of labour which was at the bottom of the social, economic and political pyramid. The caste system and social hierarchy mattered much in deciding the position of the agricultural labourer in the socioeconomic system. The caste system was firmly integrated with the structure of agrarian relations. The living condition of the labourer and his role in agricultural production clearly shows the existence of agrestic slavery in Dakshina Kannada as in other parts of South India. Nilmani Mukherjee has rightly stated that the study of labour under the Ryotwari system in Madras in the first quarter of the 19th century will not be complete without a reference to agricultural serfdom.¹ Thus, the agricultural labourers may be broadly divided into two groups, labourers and slaves. Agricultural serfdom was an important feature of the feudal or pre-capitalist and proto-capitalist socio-economic systems. But 'slavery' and 'serfdom' are ambiguous terms to apply in South India. The 'ideal type' of slave would be not only a factor of production, but also freely marketable commodity (as in the developed cash crop economies of the West Indies and the American South). At the other end of the scale would be the domestic slave, who had at the most a small role to play in production, and whose rights were guarded by contiguity with his master (as in Ashanti or Northern Nigeria). South Indian slavery belonged to neither of these types. Here the slave played a highly important part in production, and he enjoyed certain admitted rights, which accrued to him from his caste. Although this group as a whole lay at the bottom of the caste ladder, there were further gradations inside it, each sub-group having its firmly articulated rights and disabilities.²

Beginnings of Forced Labour and Slavery in India

Since the dawn of history, slavery has been in existence in different parts of the ancient world and has survived well into modern times. It was accepted with resignation and fatalism by those who were made slaves and by the masters who profited from slavery without any feelings of guilt. Agrestic slavery was an ancient socioeconomic system in India. The Brahmanical interpretation traces it back to the Parashurama legend. The institution of slavery and the buying and selling of slaves for the purpose of cultivation or domestic economy was an age old practice in India and was recognised by both Hindu and Mahammadan law.³ R.S. Sharma stated that during the Maurya period forced labour was imposed on the slaves and hired labourers and the nature of forced labour changed in the Gupta times.⁴ Further he wrote : "According to the epigraphs the practice of transferring peasants began in South India. The Pallava (third-fourth century CE) and Pralait land grants suggest that the sharecroppers and labourers who were attached to the fields were compelled to stick to them. Gradually, the practice came to embrace peasants, who seem to have been given away to the donees in Karnataka."⁵ Thus, serfdom and suppression of the agricultural labourer that began in ancient India continued to exist throughout our history and well up to the middle of the nineteenth century. However, in the case of the ancient history of Dakshina Kannada, the sources available to us do not provide references to the existence of forced labour or slavery. Further, research is required to arrive at a conclusion on this point.

The Medieval Period

The sources relating to the medieval history of South Kanara furnish ample references to the system of slavery that existed in the region. The role of the caste system and nature of social structure are of paramount importance in understanding the social formation. The inscriptions often mention *nalku jatis* (four castes) and those who did not come within the purview of these *nalku jatis* were known as *horaginavaruru* (outsiders). The inscriptions, folk songs and literary sources bear testimony to the existence of certain castes whose position in the social hierarchy was the lowest. They included the *Holeyas* (or *Pariahs*), *Madigas*, *Bakudas*, etc.⁶ Their services were sought by the high caste people in agrarian and domestic fields. The land owners cultivated their land through serfs known as *alus* (labourers) like *hennalu* (women labourers), *gandalu* (men labourers), *muladalu* (agricultural serfs who were either attached to the *mulu* land or serving permanently), *huttalu* (hereditary serfs attached to the family of landlord), *mannalu* (serf attached to the soil), etc. who belonged to the lower castes. They were given a piece of land and their salary was paid in kind (grain). These *alus* were bound by laws and customs.⁷ They were agrestic slaves and were looked upon with disdain by the society. They were considered impure and had to erect their *challas* (huts) far away in the outskirts of villages and towns. They were the victims of caste tyranny.

The low caste people in Dakshina Kannada belonged to various categories such as *Billavas*, *Halepaikas*, *Malekudiyas*, *Koragas*, *Holeyas* and *Pombadas*. An inscription dated Saka 1342 (1420 CE) refers to the *Billavas* who were employed as cultivators by the high caste people in the Barkur regions. The Vijayanagara inscriptions refer to agricultural labourers such as *okkalu* (tenant), *kilokkalu* (probably denoted servants working on lands under the *okkalu*), *holeyalu* and *hennalu*

(both these were the lowest cadre of males and females working on lands). These were slaves who could be transferred with the land, at the time of the latter's sale or donation, to the new master.⁹ However, there are no records to show the price paid by the purchaser for the labourers attached to the land, though it was obviously counted in fixing the price of the land.¹⁰ The condition of the slaves was miserable, and about their relationship with the tenants Irfan Habib wrote that "the peasant, sorely exploited himself, joined in practising the severest repression of the menial labourer. This has surely been one of the fatal tragedies in Indian social history".¹¹ The high caste community of *Bunts*, and some *Billavas* and *Maniyans* considered some *Meras* (*Harijans*) as *mulada holeyas*. The *mulada holeya* got a small paddy field, one coconut tree and one jack tree along with a bronze plate. Most of the expenses of his house were met by the owner or landlord for whom he worked. The expenses incurred by the *mulada holeya* in relation to birth, marriage and death were paid by the owner. The *mulada holeya* was given new clothes on the new year and gifts on festival and auspicious occasions. The *mulada holeya* was always required to follow his owner. If somebody died in the owner's house, the message of death was given to the family members and relatives by the *mulada holeya*. For this he used to get paddy, rice, coconut, cloth, money, etc. Even if the relationship between the owner and the *mulada holeya* was bound by love, mutual trust and help, there existed exploitation of the latter.¹² Because of the owner's protection, the *holeya* lost his right of independent living. It was almost on the verge of slavery and serfdom. Some of the inscriptions belonging to the period between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries inform us that the *holeyalus* were purchased along with the land to which they were attached.¹³ This practice is also mentioned in the *Kadatas*, another important source for the study of medieval history of Dakshina Kannada.¹⁴ The attachment of slaves to the land is mentioned in inscriptions as *idu*. Even the foreign traveller, Duarte Barbosa referred to this practice and opined that it was not a very harsh bondage.¹⁵ Whenever there was need for more labourers in Dakshina Kannada, they were even brought from the upghat region or Malenadu. An inscription refers to the labourers who were brought from Channapattana to Mudabidire in 1415 CE to clear the land for paddy cultivation.¹⁶ On the eve of the establishment of the Government of English East India Company in Dakshina Kannada, the *holeyalu* used to get one *hane* of rice from his master when he was employed in the field. The *holeyalu* built his hut near the town or village. Some of them were permitted to rent land as *genigars*. When their master had no use for their labour, they had to look after themselves. This they managed by making coir or rope from coconut husk, various kinds of baskets from *ratatu* and climbing plants, and mud walls. In the northern portion of Dakshina Kannada, the *Bakudas* were closely associated with the agricultural operation. The owner of land (*Odeya*) provided each family of the *Bakuda* a house (thatched hut) and land with sowing capacity of ten *hanes*, or about quarter of an acre. Annually, the *Bakuda* received things such as cloth, rice and knife from his master. In the case of a marriage, the *Bakuda* received one *mudi* of rice from his master. When the *Bakuda* was not employed by his master, he was allowed to hire himself as labourer. The *Pombadas* (the traditional devil dancers) were the tenants of the *Ballalas* (Jain and high caste Sudras). Their services were sought by the *Ballalas* for agricultural operations and construction of *Bhuta Sthanas*¹⁷ (devil shrines). In spite of the numerical strength of these communities which supplied the labour force to agriculture, epigraphs relating or referring to them are few. This is probably due to their inferior position in the society. Besides they did not have education and obviously could not leave behind any records on their activities.

The extension of paddy fields in terms of *timaru* (denotes an extensive land), the practise of leasing trees to tenants known as *marageni* and existence of paddy fields belonging to the Brahmanas and the Sudras side by side, the role of *nakhara* (guild) in the execution of grants and the employment of *alus* are alluded to in the Padupanambur inscription dated Saka 1464 (1542 CE).¹⁸

Apart from the Brahmin, Bunt and other upper caste landowners, the religious institutions such as temples and *mathas* owned agricultural land in *Dakshina Kannada*. The actual cultivation of land of the religious institutions was undertaken by the agricultural serf known as *alu*. Each religious institution had its own *alus* known as *gandalu*, *hennalu* and *holeyalu*. The Padupanambur *basadi* inscription referred above (1542 CE) mentions 3000 *alus*.¹⁹ Similarly, Yermalu Janardana temple had 1000 *alus* in 1559.²⁰ Labourers working for the temples and *mathas* enjoyed humane treatment and certain concessions. They were exempted from paying contributions, forced labour and house tax. For instance, the *okkalus* (tenants) in the land granted to the Kapu Dharmanatha *basadi* in 1554 CE by Kapu Madda Heggade were exempted from *kanike*, *bide* and *bidara* taxes.²¹

The Colonial Period (1799 onwards)

The system of private property was in existence in *Dakshina Kannada* during the pre-British period itself.²² The inhabitants of the region attached considerable importance to the possession of landed property. When private proprietary right was too much prevalent and land became a commercial commodity during the early colonial period, the use of agrestic slaves and their exchange grew considerably. However, there existed ryots with small land holdings and they cultivated the land by themselves without exploiting the services of other hired labourers. They managed to subsist on the limited produce of their lands. In these cases, the proprietors and the tillers were the same set of people.²³

During this period the agricultural labourers mostly belonged to the Holey caste. Based upon their nature of employment, agricultural labourers were divided into two categories; *kuliyalugalu* or hired labourers and *muladalugalu* or hereditary serfs.²⁴ The *kuliyalugalu* were also known as *salada holeyas* and were in fact landless labourers. While the *kuliyalugalu* were not employed throughout the year, the *muladalugalu* (*mulada holeyas*) were, almost on a permanent basis. The *kuliyalugalu* were generally employed during seasons of heavy work like transplanting or harvesting the paddy fields. However, *kuliyalugalu* were more in number than the *muladalugalu*. *Muladalugalu* were hereditary serfs attached to *muli wargs*, and the *saladalugalu* were bound to their masters' service by being in debt to them.²⁵ The *muladalu* or *holeyalu* not only as regards his property, but also with regard to his body, was not his own master. Slaves were not only sold but also transferred by mortgage and rent. Trade in slaves was a profitable venture. The prices of slaves differed depending on places, sex and caste. Though generally the male slaves were priced more, in certain cases females valued more. This sort of agrestic serfdom marked the classical form of feudal landlordism.

Generally, the labourers were paid in kind; either in paddy or rice. In 1801, Buchanan wrote that the wages of the hired labourers were a little more than that of the hereditary serfs. A hired man was given two *hanes* of rice per day, whereas a hereditary male serf was given one and a half *hanes* of rice per day.²⁶ They usually worked from seven in the morning to five in the evening. In

the noon they were allowed half an hour to eat their food.²⁷ In the Bekal or Kasaragod taluk, the daily rice payments to men, women and children varied as given below:²⁸

Men — from 1 seer to 2 seers.

Women— from 2/3 seer to 2 seers.

Children—from 3/8 seer to 1 seer.

But higher wages were paid when there was pressure of work during seasons of sowing, harvesting, etc. The wage rates were not the same in different parts of the District. The wages were determined by a variety of local factors. The rates were higher in the inland parts where population was comparatively sparse and the labourers were tempted to migrate to the coast or coffee plantations above the ghats. If money value or wage was compared, it was not higher there, but as rice was cheaper, the labourer got more of what he wanted and the landlord had to part with a larger proportion of his produce.

For the District in general, the rates of daily wages were as below:²⁹

Men — 11/2 seers rice and condiments = 1 anna 8 pies.

Women — 11/4 seers rice and condiments = 1 anna 5 pies.

Children — 11/6 seer of boiled rice with condiments = 7 pies.

In addition to the daily wages and the midday meals of boiled rice which was given in all parts there were some annual perquisites or privileges. The *muladalugalu* were allowed rent free land, which varied from 1/8 to 1/3 of the acre, and one or two coconut trees with sometimes a jack or mango tree. The money-value of the produce of this little allotment was variously estimated at from 1 to 5 Rupees per annum. Throughout the District, clothes were given to each labourer, the money value being estimated at 1 Rupee per adult and 6 annas for a child. It was also customary to give a *cumbly* (blanket) near the ghat region where the damp and cold render a warm clothing essential. On three to four festive occasions, presents of rice and other eatables, oil and salt were given to each labourer, or sometimes to each family. The average value of these was 1 Rupee per labourer, or Rupees 4 per family. The masters also gave presents to the labourers on occasions like birth, marriage and funeral.³⁰

The prevalence of slavery in a considerable magnitude is also borne by the fact that a majority of Indians involved in the slave trade during the nineteenth century hailed from western India. The whole western coast of India, owing to its geographical and strategic location and proximity to Africa, Arabia and Red Sea, afforded good facilities for the import of slaves. The import of slaves was facilitated by the Portuguese settlements in Goa, Daman and Diu.³¹ The trade in slaves was much profitable. It also led to the increase in their numbers and thus contributed to the growth of serfdom.

The condition of agricultural labourers in South Kanara, as in other parts of South India, was miserable during the pre-colonial and early colonial periods. The Ryotwari system, small landholdings, impoverishment of ryots, money market-economy and self-work — all went against slavery and employment of slaves. The system of slavery was abolished in the region through Act V of 1843.³² The abolition was no doubt a positive step. However, it did not result in a qualitative

improvement in the living condition of the agricultural labourers. Because custom dies hard and there existed the temptation of high wages offered by coffee planters above the ghats, many of the old estate serfs or slaves acknowledged their ancestral master and did not care to leave his service so long as they were fairly treated according to the tradition of their class.³³ Moreover, the economic, social and cultural interests of the colonial officials and the rich native ryots (who were in reality zamindars) and other intermediaries always dominated and the basic needs of the real cultivators of the soil were ignored. The ryots with small estates and the large group of agricultural labourers always lived in debt.

Another point that needs to be discussed in this context is *kumri* or shifting cultivation.³⁴ Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Billavas and Halepaikas owned lands in different parts of coastal Karnataka. With the advent of the rule of the English East India Company's Government, the land controlling powers of these castes declined. The *Malekudiyas* cultivated the lands in the hilly regions of the Western Ghats (Sahyadri) and they had exclusive right of cultivation. It is said that they worked for their masters for ten months in a year and eight hours in a day. They followed the method of shifting cultivation in the hilly region known as *kumri* and it was in vogue in the region from the middle of the fourteenth century. In all likelihood, *kumri* cultivation in Kanara during the first half of the nineteenth century was in a phase of expansion. For the Collector wrote in 1850 that "it was formerly carried on almost exclusively by a wild and little civilised class of people who had no fixed habitation, but built temporary huts on the spot which they occupied for the year, and shifted their place of residence with their cultivation".³⁵ During the period of expansion of *kumri* cultivation, its social base grew more complex. The actual *kumri* cutters were mostly forest dwellers who cultivated the forest as tenants-at-will or as labourers of substantial and influential ryots, whose oppressive terms they had no means to resist. In Dakshina Kannada, the *kumri* cutters were either local forest tribes (*Malekudiyas*) or Maratha *Kudubis*. They were a miserable class of human beings whose wretched and only means of support was *kumri* cultivation. From the 1850's the Government passed repressive laws to curtail *kumri* cultivation.³⁶ However, it continued in the later period also.

Conclusion

The foregoing details show that the general condition of agricultural labourers in Dakshina Kannada was at a low level, both economically and socially. There were mainly two types of agricultural labourers — *muladalugalu* and *kuliyalugalu*. Both of them suffered under the weight of the rich and higher classes of the society. They were affected by the rigid caste system and were reduced to the position of slaves. However, all agricultural labourers did not fall under the category of slaves. There existed the institution of private property in land and many of the small ryots tilled their land themselves. The feudal bondage helped the higher echelons and not the poor labourers who contributed considerably to agricultural production. On paper, the institution of slavery was abolished in 1843, but the agrarian proletariat had to still wait longing for a state of decent living.

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