

GRAMAPADDHATI, A MEDIEVAL TEXT OF COASTAL KARNATAKA: EXPRESSING 'HISTORICAL MEMORY' AND 'HISTORICAL REALITY'

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The contention of this paper is that a traditional and pre-modern text can exhibit historical memory and historical reality. A detailed study of traditions, written and oral, can present the historian with various options for analysis and interpretation. Such an exercise is attempted here in the case of Brahmanical traditions pertaining to coastal Karnataka and Goa.

Gramapaddhati, a medieval text, reveals mythological traditions, represented by narrations found in Goa and coastal Karnataka¹. The two regions share common cultural traditions, as represented in the form of folk culture and worship of common deities, both male and female. In the pre-modern period, the two regions had significant cultural interactions, particularly because they were part of the Vijayanagara Empire.² Apart from the political factor, social interactions must have played an important role in the emergence of close relationship between these two regions is suggested by the fact that the people of the two geographical tracts visited each other's area. Evidences are available to suggest that notable numbers of Goan traders visited coastal Karnataka, as proved by inscriptions that refer to such trade transactions.³ In the post-Portuguese period, one can note enhanced interaction between these two regions.⁴

The historiography of Goa and coastal Karnataka is replete with suggestions to this effect, but they lack analysis of cultural and social relevance of such contacts. In this sense, there is scope to analyze the significance of social relationships that emerged between different communities. This paper contends that traditional texts subtly represent social contacts between different regions.

The direct or indirect involvement of Goan Brahmanas in the composition of the text, Gramapaddhati, cannot be ruled out, particularly due to the fact that the Saraswat Brahmanas had actually migrated to coastal Karnataka during the post-15th century phase, presumably on account of the Portuguese persecution.⁵ Interaction between cultures prevail in the absence of constructed territorial boundaries, due to the use of similar languages, as in the case of Goa and Karnataka, as represented in the archival records of Goa.

The Gramapaddhati can be divided into two different sections, the first can be considered as 'historical memory' and the second as 'historical reality'. In this context, it is necessary to define these two relatively abstract concepts. Historical memory can be considered as memory of a generation of the community that moved from one place to the other and as the migration process was associated with migration of ideas and traditions. Historical reality can be explained in terms of actual details that are found in the text and corroborated by inscriptional evidence. The identification of place names and surnames shows that the text did not simply narrate conventional tradition but also the social reality as represented in the form of establishment of Brahmana settlements in the southern part of coastal Karnataka. Historical memory is represented in the form of Parashurama and Mayura Varma traditions.

The migrant Saraswat Brahmanas can be considered as the people who carried their tradition and transmitted them to the people of coastal Karnataka. The historical reality is represented by social details concerning Brahmanas who actually settled in 36 villages in the southern part of coastal Karnataka. These villages can be actually located today and their traditions identified. The historical reality also represents the settlement of Saraswat Brahmanas.⁶ This is proved by the study of inscriptions as well as traditions that represent settlements of Saraswats in Goa as well as coastal Karnataka. At the same time, the Mayura Varma tradition can be considered as a reverse historical memory since it was initially present in Karnataka and later, through Kadambas of Goa, was transferred to Goa from whence with the migration of Saraswat Brahmanas they were again transmitted to coastal Karnataka.⁷

The study of historiography of coastal Karnataka shows that scholars did not consider this text as a serious source to study history. Considering the fact that historians of early 20th century lacked facilities available to the present historians, one can sympathize with them for ignoring a text, which did not reveal much political details, although it contained considerable social details. At the same time, historians of the first half of the 20th century have mentioned this text as a basis for their subsequent narration.

Gramapaddhati (literally village arrangement or scheme) is a medieval Brahmanical text of coastal Karnataka that depicts the traditions of Parashurama and Mayura Varma who represent the power of Brahmanas and Kshatriyas respectively. This may point to a Brahmana-Kshatriya alliance as pointed out by previous studies that analysed social situation in other parts of India.⁸ Despite the

fact that this text cannot be placed in a particular time and space, the symbols and motifs that it represents are interesting. Although religious content is dominant in this text, it also comprises sufficient secular details. The principal attempts of the text are to legitimize and justify the domination of Brahmanas.

The western coast is known for Brahmanical traditions and settlements, as found in the regions such as Goa, coastal Karnataka and Kerala. The traditions of this region have similarities. For example, Parashurama tradition can be noticed in Kerala and South Kanara.⁹ This is evident in oral traditions as represented in the Tulu folklore, although one might argue that folklore represented 'little culture'.¹⁰ Interestingly, Saraswat Brahmanas are found in all the three regions. Coastal Karnataka and Goa, on the other hand, shared political and social traditions, in the sense that Mayura Varma and Parashurama are mentioned in traditions belonging to these two regions. The emergence of Vaiṣṇava mathas in coastal Karnataka in the 13th and 14th centuries was an important event, culminating in the period when Gramapaddhati was composed.

Migration of Saraswats from Goa to coastal Karnataka, can be considered as a major factor leading to prevalence of similarities between traditions belonging to the two regions. This is possible because the text in question is dated to post-14th century period when there was migration of large numbers of Saraswat Brahmanas, particularly after the arrival of the Portuguese in early 16th century. The migration thesis can be supported by the fact that large numbers of Saraswat settlements are found even today in coastal Karnataka and these Brahmana families trace history of their family deity to Goa. The control of temple management in Goa by Saraswats, belonging to both Goa and coastal Karnataka further supports this contention. In addition, details about Saraswat Brahmanas are available in the text.

Establishment of similarities between traditions of Brahmanas on the west coast is important because it provides a clue concerning the purpose of the texts that were composed by particular sections of Brahmanas. The texts such as Sahyadri Khanda, supposedly belonging to Skanda Purāṇa, possess features found in texts belonging to various regions of the west coast.¹¹ They represent attempts of Brahmanas to obtain legitimacy for their dominant position. Legitimacy could be obtained in two ways: first through land grants to Brahmanas and second, through construction of texts. Perhaps, the texts represented the social reality of domination of Brahmanas and sought to further invigorate their position. The text represented an alliance between religious

authority and secular power. At the same time, it is not practical to dwell upon historicity of the text.

It does not address the historian, simply because that does not seem to be its purpose. Despite reference to historical and mythological personalities such as Mayura Varma and others, it is not possible to place this text in a historical context. There are evidences to suggest that Kadambas had ruled coastal Karnataka and a section of them ruled over Goa, the neighbouring territory that lies to the north on the same coast. The migration of people, and along with them their traditions, is an undeniable possibility. This is because the Goa Brahmanas received land grants from the Kadambas.¹² Interestingly, the text refers to a few places, which can be, in actuality, located in Goa and not in coastal Karnataka.¹³ Based on this, one can as well surmise that the tradition developed over a period of time.

The historical memory must have acted as the basis of this text. The Parashurama tradition forms the basis of this text, followed by the story of Mayura Varma, who ruled over some parts of Karnataka during the 5th century AD. Evidently, the text was not composed at one go and one can notice later additions, as proved by reference to existence of as many as 36 versions of this text. Interestingly, the Hindi word *battisa*, found in one of the versions of Gramapaddhati, indicates that additions were taking place over a long period of time.¹⁴ Based on this analysis, one can divide the text into two distinct sections: the first part – the mythological section, a crude imitation of other purānic texts already in vogue, and the second part containing rather contemporary social details including the Brahmana and non-Brahmana populations.

An important feature of this text is the overt representation of domination of a particular category of Brahmanas in the southern part of coastal Karnataka. The Brahmanical domination is symbolized by narration of the story of Parashurama and Mayura Varma. To begin with, both were Brahmanas and represented the power of Kshatriya, since Parashurama had annihilated Kshatriyas and Mayura Varma was originally a Brahmana who later became a Kshatriya. The selection of these two important personalities is interesting because they represented the power of Brahmanas, their abilities to achieve unexpected deeds.

Another important theme associated with the text is the concept of *dānā* (gift) of land or land grant. Parashurama, originally, gives land to Brahmanas and assures them protection. Mayura Varma also continues this policy and assures

state protection. The absence of king or state leads to chaos. An important feature of the state – alliance between elite communities – is represented in the form of close relationship between Kshatriyas and Brahmanas.¹⁵ The protest of non-Brahmanas is witnessed in the state (only) when the king loses his authority.¹⁶ This shows dissatisfaction among non-Brahmanas concerning land grants given to Brahmanas which was perpetrated as a tradition. The power struggle between the non-Brahmanas and the Kshatriyas finally leads to alliance between the rulers and the Brahmanas, resulting in re-establishment of authority by the state. Two important developments of medieval coastal Karnataka were land grants given to Brahmanas and crystallization of Brahmanical society in the form of creation of Brahmanical mathas.

Institutionalization of Brahmanas led to competition among them, leading to composition of myths concerning allegedly immoral activities of particular Brahmanical groups. While a few Brahmanical groups are legitimized, others are criticized and considered as fallen. This significant information shows the changes taking place in the society in the form of emergence of mathas, which needed support of dominant social groups.

Historical reality – the establishment of different Brahmana groups – is represented in the form of various Brahmana families settled in various villages. Migration is another important theme of the text. We see the Brahmanas migrating not once but several times from outside regions and occupy a position of managing agricultural production and allied activities with the assistance of Sudra peasants, thereby showing the dependence of Brahmanas on peasant communities, who, nevertheless, do not always tolerate their exploitation as revealed by incidents of protest and revolt against Brahmanical domination. Brahmanas indulging in presumably non-Brahmanical and secular activities such as horticulture, agriculture, cattle rearing and administration are important developments, which should not be ignored without appropriate reason. The Brahmanas, being outsiders, and with the establishment of mathas in many places yet to take place, had to indulge in such professions in order to maintain themselves.¹⁷ The support of political authority in the form of the Kadambas was important. At the same time, this community had to contend with local resistance, as the tradition mentions conflicts between Brahmanas and non-Brahmanas, as can be seen in the text of Gramapaddhati.

The studies of different texts suggest that there were different waves of migration to the region from other parts of the western coast. Distinction between

different Brahmanical groups is obvious, as while some groups migrate from Ahicchatra, which can be located in North India and in Badami, other groups are clearly described as Brahmanas who migrated from other parts of the western coast including Goa.

A critical study of Brahmanical traditions of South Kanara points to significant themes, and major aspects of social and cultural history of the region. Historical memory was expressed through Parashurama tradition. Historical reality, which is verifiable, is expressed in the form of details concerning Brahmana settlements in South India.

End notes

1. A few scholars have studied Gramapaddhati. B.A. Saletore, *Ancient Karnataka, History of Tuluvras*, Oriental Book Agency: Poona, 1936 ; A Balakrishna Shetty (ed.), *Sheenappa Heggade Samagra Sahitya*, (in Kannada), Udipi, 1991; K.V. Ramesh, *A History of South Kanara*, Dharwad, 1970; P. Gururaja Bhatt, *Studies in Tuluva History and Culture*, Kallianpur, 1975; Nagendra Rao, *Brahmanas of South India*, Kalpaz Publications, New Delhi, 2005.
2. Richard M. Eaton, "Kiss My Foot', Said the King: Firearms, Diplomacy, and the Battle for Raichur, 1520", *Modern Asian Studies*, 43, 1, 2009, pp. 289-313.
3. K.G. Vasanthamadhava, *Trends in Karnataka Historical Research*, Mangalore, 1996, p. 29; Nagendra Rao, *Craft Production and Trade in South Kanara: AD 1000-1763*, Gyan Publications, 2006, p. 61.
4. Nagendra Rao, *Craft, Production and Trade in South Kanara*, p. 121.
5. A.K. Priolkar, *The Goa Inquisition: being a quatercentenary commemoration study of the inquisition in India*, Rajhauns Vitaran, 2008.
6. Manoharrao Sardesai, *A history of Konkani literature: from 1500 to 1992*, Sahitya Akademi, 2000, p. 27 ; Karin Larsen, *Faces of Goa: a journey through the history and cultural revolution of Goa and other communities influenced by the Portuguese*, Gyan Books, 1998, p. 87.
7. A.K. Priolkar, *The Goa Inquisition*.
8. Richard Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree A Study of Indian Culture and Society*, Oxford University Press, 1999 ; M.G.S. Narayanan, *Re-interpretations in South Indian History*, College Book House, 1977.

9. Kesavan Veluthat, *Brahmana Settlements in Kerala Historical Studies*, Calicut, 1978.
10. B. A. Vivek Rai, *Tulunaada Janapada Saahitya, Kannada Sahitya Parishat*, 1985.
11. Nagendra Rao, "Sahyadri Khanda and Reconstruction of Social History of South Kanara", *Indica*, Vol. 36, No. 2, September 1999.
12. Nagendra Rao, "Land grants in Early Medieval Goa", *Indica*, Vol. 41, No. 1, March-September 2004.
13. V.T. Gune, *Gazetteer of the Union Territory Goa, Daman and Diu District Gazetteer Part I: Goa, Panaji*, 1979.
14. The reference to Hindi word *battisa* may also indicate interactions between the north and the south. It is possible that the Brahmanas who migrated southward maintained links with sections of Brahmanas who stayed back in the north.
15. This may point to the origin of state in this region, with kings and Brahmanas entering into an agreement for subjection of the rural folk, resulting in the legitimacy of both elite groups. The social contract theory of kingship can be applied in this context.
16. Kesavan Veluthat, "Non-Brahmana Protest in Brahmanical Literary Expressions: the Gramapaddhati from South Kanara" Unpublished Paper, Hyderabad, 1995.
17. Ancient Indian texts permit such occupations by Brahmanas based on the Apaddharma theory. This theory states that during difficult times a Brahmana can indulge in non-Brahmanical occupations. Buddhist texts comprise innumerable references to Brahmana carpenters and artisans. This shows that different categories of Brahmanas existed as all Brahmanas could not excel in mantra recitation and naturally they were compelled to indulge in physical labour, though it was disallowed by the sastras.