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Multiplicity of labor relationships in coastal Karnataka

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Global labour history and the labour history of South Kanara

In recent decades, the global history of labor has moved from a mere Marxist methodology to a neo-Marxist methodology. This process is especially visible in the writings of Marcel van der Linden, who has explicitly challenged the traditional Marxist notion of the working class, influenced by the process of emergence of the industrial society:

...all definitions of the working class being used have three aspects in common. Firstly, they assume that members of the working class share at least one characteristic, namely that they are dependent on a wage for their survival, ... Secondly, they involve the (often implicit) assumption that workers are part of families who in principle also belong to the working class... Thirdly, all definitions assume that the working class is next to, or counterposed to, other social classes, in particular the employers...¹

A broader definition of the working class is thus provided:

...the ensemble of carriers of labour power whose labour power is sold or hired out to another person under economic and non economic compulsions, regardless of whether the carrier of labour power is him-or herself selling or hiring it out and, regardless of whether the carrier him – or herself owns means of production.²

¹ VAN DER LINDEN, Marcel. "Who are the workers of the world?: Marx and beyond". *Workers of the World International Journal of Strikes and Social Conflicts*, vol.1, no.2, January 2013, pp. 58- 59.

² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Within this framework, Van der Linden has underlined the need to accommodate large numbers of workers or social groups within the working class³ and has referred to the concept of “extended or subaltern working class”.⁴ He has written that:

...there is a large class of people within capitalism, whose labour power is commodified in various ways. ...it includes chattel slaves, sharecroppers, small artisans and wage earners. It is the historic dynamics of this “multitude” that we should try to understand. ...in capitalism there always existed, and probably will continue to exist, several forms of commodified labour subsisting side by side...Capitalism has utilized many kinds of work relationships, some mainly based on economic compulsion, others with a strong non economic component.⁵

Van der Linden’s argument applies to capitalist and pre-capitalist periods. His theoretical frame allows us to consider that both economic and non-economic methods were used to coerce workers – in the context of South Kanara, as we will see, the caste system proved a to be a fundamental non-economic method to reach labor commodification, while debt was a powerful economic tool to impose forced labor on peasants. Moreover, it makes large numbers of workers, both with and without labor power, visible, and points to their mutual relationships, as in the case of wage earners and slaves who actually performed the same kind of work in late medieval South Kanara.

This paper discusses the multiplicity of labor relations that emerged in the region called South Kanara, a part of coastal Karnataka in South India, in the late medieval and early modern periods. It seeks to show that different categories of workers – free and unfree – belonging to different castes existed, thereby also pointing to the fundamental difference between caste and class. Moreover, it refers to the theory of “extended subalterns” to show the need to go beyond the traditional Marxist pattern of analysis of labour relations, and attempts to analyze information concerning different regions of the West Coast of India including Gujarat and Malabar.

³ One may note in this context that wage work may take different forms and that, in the pre-modern period, it was not necessarily paid in cash, as the non-monetized rural centres of South Kanara show.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

Politics and economy in South Kanara

Since antiquity, South Kanara was under the control of local and supra local dynasties, such as the Alupas and the Hoysalas; the latter had their capital in Dwarasamudra.⁶ The coming of the Vijayanagara in the fourteenth century was a major development, with Vijayanagara (“City of victory”) in the modern Bellary district of Karnataka as the capital. The Vijayanagara was a multicultural or multilinguistic state, as administrators spoke different South Indian languages such as Kannada, Telugu, and Tamil. Scholars have analyzed its administrative nature. Burton Stein applied segmentary state theory in the case of this region, thereby showing the prevalence of large numbers of semi-autonomous and autonomous units in the form of Nayakas, which replaced the Nadus of the Tamil country.⁷ Nevertheless, scholars such as Noboru Karashima, R. Champakalakshmi and Kesavan Veluthat have questioned this theory, thereby showing the need to apply feudalism theory in the context of the region. Since segmentary state theory failed to discuss the question of social formation in Karnataka,⁸ and Noboru Karashima has provided considerable epigraphic and other evidence to prove the feudalism thesis, we are inclined to accept the position of the latter author, pointing to the importance of the feudal relationship in this region in the form of serfdom and forced labor, although we also acknowledge that Vijayanagara kings attempted to control this region by giving grants to temples and appointing two governors in Barakuru and Mangaluru, showing the importance of the region for Vijayanagara.

Within the state of Vijayanagara, South Kanara emerged as a strategic region because of its ports such as Mangalore and Barkur. For this reason, local chieftains such as Bangas and Chautas were granted autonomy,⁹ and their

⁶ RAMESH, K.V. *A History of South Kanara*. Dharwad: Karnatak University, 1970.

⁷ STEIN, Burton. *The New Cambridge History of India: Vijayanagara*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

⁸ CHAMPAKALAKSHMI, R. “State and Economy: South India: Circa AD 400-1300”. In: THAPAR, Romila. ed. *Recent Perspectives of Early Indian History*. Bombay: Popular Prakashana, 1995; VELUTHAT, Kesavan. *The Early Medieval South India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010 ; KARASHIMA, Noboru. *History and Society in South India: The Cholas to Vijayanagar: Comprising South Indian History and Society Towards a New Formation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

⁹ RAMESH. *A History of South Kanara*. *op.cit.*

activities were not interfered with, provided they accepted Vijayanagara's suzerainty. Moreover, this autonomy – and the feudalization process – grew after the Vijayanagara period, both because of the lack of a central authority and because of the local feudal lords' fight against the Portuguese. By virtue of this local resistance, reinforced by the opposition of the Keladi kings who succeeded the Vijayanagara, the Portuguese failed to implement their cartazes (passport) policy in the region¹⁰ and were forced to establish a direct relationship with the kings of Malabar of Kerala. While they did influence local society there, they did not produce any substantial change in South Kanara, where a fundamental continuity of economic and social institutions is visible in this period.

There is evidence to suggest that the region was influenced by a feudal social formation. Villages were ruled by feudal lords, such as the Bunts, who possessed their own militia and respected the *brahmanas* as the religious authority. One can actually compare this alliance between Bunts and Brahmanas to the Brahmana-Ksatriya alliance in the Tamil country, although in South Kanara, like in other parts of South India, one is not able to find Ksatriyas.

Brahmanas were respected by both local and supra local authorities, could represent state authority, and controlled non-brahmana workers, as we learn from the evidence of large numbers of land grants. The presence of brahmanas, temples and local chieftains contributed to the feudalization process of the region and brahmanas possibly played an important role in legitimizing the position of local chieftains. Two classes therefore emerged, with brahmanas and non-brahmana landlords as dominant communities, and non brahmana workers as subordinate groups. As this implies, dominance was not related to caste alone, that is, not every brahmana was a landlord, as not all non-brahmanas were workers. Rather, work and workers cut across caste lines – this being a very important feature of the region. At the same time, one can suggest that large numbers of untouchables were serfs who could be controlled by dominant groups, while large numbers of Sudra workers could retain their independence.

What about social mobility within this framework? Specific stories show that social mobility among dominant groups was permissible, but there are

¹⁰ SHASTRY, B.S. *Goa-Kanara Portuguese Relations, 1498-1763*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2000.

not many cases of upward social mobility. In a way, a case such as the one of Mayura Sharma (brahmana) becoming Mayura Varma (ksatriya), is an example of downward social mobility, which was also an important phenomenon related to the need to obtain large numbers of workers. The text called *Gramapaddhati* also mentions fallen brahmanical groups,¹¹ pointing to the fact that some brahmanical groups had to indulge in agricultural production. Indeed, some brahmana groups worked in their own plots, as is the case of the Havyaka brahmanas who worked in their areca plantations.

If then commodification of labor was not necessarily along caste lines, caste did play a role in allowing brahmana landlords to convince Sudra workers to work in their land.¹² Thus, cases of unfree workers becoming landlords were rare, and a patron-client relationship prevailed in the region – differently from its neighbor Kerala – until the late eighteenth century British conquest of South Kanara.

Even today, South Kanara is mostly an agricultural zone, and agricultural production was the major economic activity of the region in the past as well.¹³ The region had sufficient rainfall and river resources, obtained a considerable amount of tradable commodities from the ghat regions, and developed close relationships between the ports and hinterland. In particular, it became a major rice exporter during the Portuguese period – Portuguese *cartazes* refer to sale of superior quality of rice to the Portuguese-controlled regions such as Goa, West Asia, Africa, and Malabar.

Apart from agricultural production, there were other activities such as craft production and trade. In the historical or modern period, South Kanara was not known for production of high quality craft goods,¹⁴ thus differing from the Northern Karnataka, Telugu and Tamil regions. The region possibly exported agricultural goods and imported craft goods such as textiles. Nevertheless, coarse varieties of cloths used for consumption by common people were produced.

¹¹ RAO, Nagendra. *Brahmanas of South India*. New Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2005.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ VASANTHAMADHAVA, K.G. *Western Karnataka: Its Agrarian Relations*. New Delhi: Navrang, 1991.

¹⁴ RAO, Nagendra. *Craft Production and Trade in South Kanara AD 1000-1763*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2006.

Most importantly, craft production and trade were controlled by migrants and outsiders. For example, one finds reference to large numbers of Telugu artisans and gold smiths from Goa and other regions of India. Similarly, large numbers of traders on the coast were outsiders, especially Arabs and other Muslim categories, and Saraswats. Their settlements could be found in ports such as Basrur and Mangalore. Trade contacts led to the exchange of goods and ideas with other parts of the world, thus making South Kanara history become part of global labor history. Furthermore, trade networks strongly impacted the labour commodification process, and particularly the rice trade contributed to this development, as it compelled local landlords to enhance agricultural production, a process that was further intensified after the conquest of South Kanara by the British.

Free and unfree labor, or the multiplicity of labour relations

It is important to question the distinction between “free” and “unfree” labour, usually equated to the distinction between proletarians and non proletarians.¹⁵ In the traditional view, proletarians are wage workers, who lack property, and therefore are compelled to sell their labour, but are able to select the persons who purchase their labor. Conversely, non-proletarians are those who are either compelled to sell their labour to specific buyers whom they cannot select, or they possess some property and therefore cannot be considered as propertyless.

In the case of pre-colonial South Kanara there is evidence to state that these two categories existed. However, it is not possible to divide workers into watertight compartments such as free and unfree. For instance, as Jan Breman has shown for Gujarat, in South Kanara as well unfree labour was converted into free labour during a particular period of the year, in connection with agricultural work. In such instances, the unfree workers were allowed to sell their labour to new masters.

Moreover, while the traditional literature envisages a progressive replacement of unfree labour by free labour,¹⁶ no such a linear process

¹⁵ VAN SCHENDEL, William. “Searching labor historiography: Pointers from South Asia”. In: BEHAL, Rana P and VAN DER LINDEN, Marcel. eds. *Coolies, Capitalism, and Colonialism: Studies in Indian labor history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

¹⁶ For a critical survey, see SCHENDEL. “Searching labor historiography...” *op.cit.*

occurred in the region, since unfree labour was actually preferred by both masters and servants in the context of patron-client relationships that were also typical in regions such as Gujarat and South Kanara. This pattern was both culture- and class-bound. Like in Gujarat, for instance, the Anavil brahmanas in South Kanara claimed landownership by narrating the legend of Rama giving them land, thus using myths in order to justify their dominant position in society.¹⁷ At the same time, workers largely accepted these narratives, and did not attempt to become free before the age of industrialization.

Agricultural property in this region was termed *balu*, literally “to live” or “life”. This implies that land had become important for the population, as the region had sufficient rainfall, fertile soil, and a river system suited for agricultural production. The kings, chieftains or feudal lords were landowners, and peasants or tenants or *okkalu* settled in the land, as part of a process of subinfeudation of land, with tenants in turn distributing land to subtenants, or *kilokkalu*, sometimes without permission from the landlords themselves. A network of relationships thus emerged between feudal lord, *okkalu*, and *kilokkalu* who used the assistance of hired labourers and hereditary labourers or serfs.¹⁸

Hereditary serfs were controlled by economic and non-economic means. In particular, the need to maintain their family and the fear of social ostracism prevented them from opposing their bounded status. Conversely, hired laborers – or *kuliyalu*, *kuli* meaning “wage” – mostly paid in kind – were free in principle, and could select their masters, but lacked security. In the process of their commodification, economic means were used: in particular, the master could evict them, thus *de facto* leading to greater dependency between the master and servant, since, unlike modern industrial proletarians, they would rarely leave their village to go to another village or urban centre in search of wages. Mostly paid in kind, in order to increase their security, they would rather accept to become hereditary serfs, as in the halipratha system in Gujarat. Therefore, although possibly large numbers of workers were *kuliyalu*, they could become *muladalu* (serfs) due to particular

¹⁷ BREMEN, Jan. *Patronage and Exploitation: Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat, India*. Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.

¹⁸ RAMESH. *A History of South Kanara*. *op.cit.*

situations. In this sense, “proletarian workers” were turned into “non-proletarians”.

Other kind of labour relations also existed. The Dherds, for instance, were considered as agricultural serfs who depended on their masters, as was the case of the Mogers. They were also called “conditional slaves” because they remained attached to the master as long as the latter looked after them and their family. In the absence of support from the master, the Dherds could look for new perspectives in order to gain their living, but could alternatively also have been bought and sold. According to the sources, moreover, a second group of Dherds existed that was attached to the land, and could not leave it. Finally, a third category of Dherds had to serve their master along with their family, and when the slave died his family members would go to his wife’s brother and serve his master. Slavery then did not end with death, for even if, theoretically, a slave could become free, in practice he or she continued to remain under the control of the master.¹⁹

Workers called *holeyalu* and *hennalu* (female serfs), for instance, had to work in the field of masters. The first were considered as “slaves who could be transferred with the land, at the time of the latter’s sale or donation, to the new master”.²⁰ The transfer of not just land, but also labour indicates that these workers were considered as mere commodities. The social status of the worker played an important role in compelling workers to accept their subordinate position. Not surprisingly, *holeya* in the local Kannada language means “untouchable”.²¹

The *hennalu* was a female worker, showing that women were compelled to work on the land as well. The term *alu* means servant, someone who had to work for the master. While the *okkalu* and *kilokkalu* can be considered as free wage labour, *holeya* and *hennalu* can be considered as unfree wage labour attached to the land, highlighting the emergence of multiple forms of serfdom in this region, in the context of a feudal mode of production.

¹⁹ KUMAR, Dharma. *Land and Caste in South India: Agricultural Labor in the Madras Presidency*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1965, p. 39.

²⁰ RAMESH. *A History of South Kanara. op.cit.*, p. 286. In the historiography of the region “serf” and “slave” are interchangeably used, thereby potentially creating a confusion regarding their actual implication for the labour history of South Kanara. In the present context, the term slave may be read as serf.

²¹ BHAT, N. Shyam. *South Kanara: 1799-1860: Study in Colonial Administration And Regional Response*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1998.

Moreover, after seventeenth century slavery was introduced in South Kanara, in the context of the global slave trade, and especially as a result of the emergence of the Muslim dynasty in the Deccan, trade contacts with the Arabs, and the coming of Europeans. Slaves were mainly employed as domestic servants of rich traders, kings, and their officers, but were not incorporated in the agricultural sector, where no shortage of labour existed, due to the presence of hereditary serfs and hired labourers. Possibly for the same reason, the sources suggest that in Kanara a more liberal form of slavery existed than in Malabar, for in the first region slaves could own and cultivate their own piece of land and could interact with their masters.²²

More broadly, however, this document underlines a process of expansion of forced labour in early modern South Kanara, and the integration - if relatively late and peculiar - of the region into the longer-term slave trade in southwestern India. The latter can be traced back at least into the Vijayanagara and post Vijayanagara period. For instance, after the fall of the Vijayanagara in the sixteenth century around 700 illegitimate children had been sold as slaves by the local authorities of the Ikkeri kingdom. Furthermore, before the coming of the Portuguese, the Arabs were already well established in some parts of western coastal India, through Muslim dynasties in the Deccan in the late medieval period.²³ Within this context, Abyssinian slaves are mentioned in the context of the provinces of western coastal India, while later, many African slaves attempted to become free from their Portuguese masters. The emergence of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan in Mysore, who ruled the region in the late eighteenth century, also contributed to the increase of slavery. For that period, a reference is made to 20,000 slaves in the form of prisoners of war, sudras and brahmanas who had lost their caste status as they had interacted with lower caste people.

In the early nineteenth century, British records claimed that in the region of coastal Karnataka there were nearly 80,000 slaves - one in twelve inhabitants. According to another report, there were nearly 50,000 slaves.²⁴ The documents, written in order to oppose slavery in the USA, made

²² ADAM, William. *The Law and Custom of Slavery in British India In A Series Of Letters To Thomas Fowell Buxton*. Boston: Weeks, Jordan, 1840, p. 170.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

explicit reference to the policy of importing slaves from Arabia and Africa to Goa, and consequently to other parts of the western coast.

The caste system played an important role in the commodification process. In South Kanara, just as in its neighbour states, there were brahmana and sudra landowners, and sudra and untouchable workers. The brahmanas obtained large numbers of land grants, a practice that was in use before, during and after the Vijayanagara period, only to stop when South Kanara became part of the Madras Presidency. The kings supported the brahmanas to justify their own authority and, in turn, the brahmanical position was safeguarded due to their social position. As priests and knowledgeable people, brahmanas were respected in society, preaching bhakti philosophy. The construction of large numbers of temples in South Kanara further justified brahmanical domination. The sudra landowners benefited from their alliance with brahmanas, this being a traditional pattern in South Kanara. In the absence of a strong central authority, the ruling classes could exploit vulnerable groups such as the *holeyas* in the form of *kuliyalu* and *muladalu*. Both men and women workers were subjected to exploitation.

However, not all brahmanas owned land. Possibly a large number of landless brahmanas existed, who became temple priests. Some brahmanas also tilled their own fields, particularly within those migrant brahmanical communities such as the karad and the havyaka brahmanas. The Gowda Saraswat Brahmanas were also given a low social status because they indulged in the non-brahmanical profession of trade.²⁵ Therefore, there were different categories of brahmanas, as there were sudras who did not work as labourers, but were chieftains and land owners. Thus, caste cannot be equated with class, for there were classes within castes.

However, this of course is not to say that social status did not play an important role in the commodification of labour, especially for workers who belonged to the lowest category in the caste hierarchy. Different terms are used to refer to them: *huttalu*, *mannalu*, and *salada*. *Huttalu* refers to a person who was a slave by birth. *Mannalu* was a serf who was attached to the land, and *salada* was the person who became a serf due to a debt

²⁵ RAO. *Brahmanas of South India*. *op.cit.*