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## A Peasant Uprising In South Kanara (1830-31)<sup>1</sup>

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1.1 In the present paper an attempt is made to analyse one of the significant peasant uprisings that broke out in South Kanara District during 1830-31. These peasant disturbances are referred to as "Koots"<sup>1a</sup> in the administrative records of the British East India Company. The vital factor involved in these peasant uprisings was that of land revenue, which was a matter of conflict between the peasants and the Company Government. The peasants of South Kanara resisted the high land revenue assessment and exaction along with other grievances like salt and tobacco monopoly, introduction of law courts and stamps, customs and so on. The burden of taxes was particularly felt by the peasants due to the state of economic depression and the absence of lucrative market for agricultural products. In this sense these peasant movements may be considered as "tax rebellions", a phrase which Eric Stokes makes use of to define the nature of the peasant violence of 1857 in India<sup>2</sup>. Though the peasants of the region fought against the oppressive system of taxation followed by the Company Government, they were not fighting against the British on political grounds. Political consciousness of the peasants had to be shaped from above, it came gradually among the Indian peasants under the impact of the nationalist movement; the intelligentsia acted as catalysts in bringing radical ideas among them<sup>3</sup>.

1.2 These peasant uprisings should be understood against the background of the land revenue system and administration that the Company Government carried on in South Kanara during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Since private property in land<sup>4</sup> was deep-rooted in South Kanara, the Company Government had introduced Ryotwari system of land revenue administration here. In the case of the Ryotwari System introduced by Sir Thomas Munro 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. In fact, many of the ryots were zamindars and they used to lease out the land for cultivation to the undertenants through the various systems of tenancy that prevailed in the region. This system of leasing and sub-leasing of land gave scope for the exploitation of the poor peasants by the native landlords. A notable defect in the field of revenue administration was the absence of a regular system of surveying the land and its result was not only overassessment on land but also anomalies in assessing lands. In most cases the British continued the pre-existing system<sup>5</sup> of rough-and-ready

assessment without a complete survey or classification of land. Another significant evil in the revenue assessment was that the *jummabundy* price or the government rate of commutation of the value of agricultural products was quite often higher than the market price. In such cases the peasants had to sell a large quantity of their produce to make the payments to the Government.<sup>6</sup>

1.3 The colonial government, ever since its establishment in South Kanara, demanded its share of the revenue only in cash and not in kind, though both these systems were prevalent in the region prior to its annexation by the British in 1799. The peasants were generally driven to selling and mortgaging land to realise money to meet the government demand. The presence of the merchants as middlemen and also as moneylenders was another evil that hit hard the living condition of the poor ryots. The confiscation of property and public auctioning of land to realise arrears from land was the technique which the government had usually adopted. The remissions that the government gave almost every year did not really help the ryots. The lack of interest shown by the colonial administration in developmental activities like irrigation added to the difficulties of the ryots. The natural implication of all these, as the present writer has shown elsewhere<sup>7</sup>, was the general impoverishment of agriculture and the ryots. Besides these general evils of revenue administration, there were certain specific factors responsible for the outbreak of these peasant uprisings. First and foremost, during the years 1827-30 there was a considerable fall in the price of rice, the staple commodity which earned the livelihood of the peasants of South Kanara. John Stokes reported that it was due to the lack of demand, both inland and foreign, for rice<sup>8</sup>. In addition to this, there prevailed considerable discrepancy in the government rate of commutation and the market price of agricultural goods. The price of rice, pepper, cardamom, coconut etc, also had fallen considerably during these years due to lack of demand from Bombay.

1.4 The studies of A. Sarada Raju<sup>9</sup> and P.J. Thomas<sup>10</sup> have shown how the first half of the nineteenth century witnessed a state of economic depression throughout the Madras Presidency. The District of South Kanara, of the late 1820's and early 1830's was not exception to the phenomenon of economic depression that prevailed throughout the Madras Presidency<sup>11</sup>.

1.5 In addition to these market fluctuations, the defects inherent in the British revenue administration increased the hardships of the ryots. By 1830-31, overassessment had caused problems like land mortgage, rural indebtedness, transfer of property from the hands of the poor to the rich, rise of merchant moneylenders and the general improvement of agriculture. In 1831, H. Dickinson, the collector of the District reported: "The utmost distress prevails among them (the ryots), and I cannot hesitate to say that it is absolutely necessary that a considerable amount of revenue should be permanently relinquished in order to save them from utter ruin....measures should, I would beg to say, be at once adopted for ascertaining what the true circumstances of the estates are, and the Beriz (fixed amount of assessment) upon them ought to be fixed on what such actual examination might show us that they were able to bear"<sup>12</sup>.

1.6 Further, the year 1830-31 saw the failure of crops in South Kanara. The ryots never had sufficient stock to sell, realise money and meet the government dues. Another factor which caused the *Koots* was the harsh and hasty manner of assessment of revenue made by R. Dickinson in the *Huzoor Jumma bundy* of November 1830<sup>13</sup>. He gave only a laughable and uneven remission to the hard-hit peasants. In addition to these problems, the ryots also complained about the disastrous results of the salt and tobacco monopoly and the expenses involved in attending the courts, the expenses of stamps, the stamp laws, ferry farms and the *abkary*<sup>14</sup>.

1.7 The signs of the peasant unrests could be seen in the closing months of 1830, when the ryots gave individual and general petitions or *arzees* complaining of their losses. But they developed and came to the fore in the beginning months of 1831<sup>15</sup>. In their *arzees* to Dickinson and the Circuit and Jilla courts the ryots complained of their losses and the way in which the settlement had been made with much haste and demanded revenue remissions. In the second stage, that is, by the beginning of January 1831, the ryots started their *Koots*. In these meetings they discussed their problems, the ways and means of solving them and also questions relating to the organisation of the movement. The *Koots* first started in the southern portions of Kanara and it soon spread to the northern portions, even upto Kundapura and beyond. Barkur, Buntwal, Brahmawar, Madhur, Manjeshwar, Mulki, Kadri Kumbala, Mogral, Uppinangady and Vittal were some of the important places where the ryots of the respective regions had assembled in *Koots*<sup>16</sup>. Manjunatha Temple at Kadri was the centre of these peasant uprisings, where the "Grand Koot" was organised towards the end of January 1831<sup>17</sup>. Similarly, the Venkatramana Temple at Basrur, the Mahamayi Temple at Mangalore, the Temple at Manjeshwara and another Temple at Wamanjoor were some of the important centres of the *Koots*<sup>18</sup>. The use of these temples for *Koots* reminds us of the role played by the mosques and *madrassah* in the case of the Moplah rebellions in Malabar which has been analysed by D.N. Dhanagare<sup>19</sup>. Each of the *Koots* had its own leaders and all of them met and discussed at the "Grand Koot" (at Kadri). The organisers of the *Koots* made use of a "Secret Council". This council consisted of two or three *muktesars* (head roots) of each (sub-division of a Taluk). It acted as a think-tank of the rebellion. Further, they made use of anonymous pamphlets to spread their ideas and programmes among the ryots.

1.8 The participants in these *Koots* at times made bold to attack the government servants. A *Magane Shanbogue* (village accountant) in Barkur and an Ameen in Mulki, who were sent to read to government proclamation were severely assaulted by the ryots<sup>20</sup>. This peasant intransigence which surfaced in November 1830, continued upto the end of March 1831. It was after N.S. Cameron's (who succeeded H. Dickinson as Collector) promise to the ryots that their petitions would be considered and remissions would be made after an examination of their losses to redress their hardships that they dispersed and stopped organising the *Koots*. Thus, by April 1831 the rumblings of *Koot* rebellions died down.

1.9 The leadership of these peasant uprisings was represented by all classes of the society irrespective of their social and economic status. But mostly the leaders belonged to Brahmin and Bunt communities. These were the two important landholding communities of the region. Many important leaders were government officials, for, they were also landholders and had, for that reason, complaints against the government. For example, Soorupa was the Head Moonshee of Dickinson's *cutcherry* at Brahmawar.<sup>21</sup> Krishna Row was the Head Serishtadar, Rangarow (brother of Krishna Row) was the Serishtadar of Mangalore Taluk, Vyasa Row was the Serishtadar of Bekal (Kasaragod) Taluk<sup>22</sup>, and Narnappa was a Record-Keeper<sup>23</sup>. These were the chief champions of the rebellion. Thus, the *Koots* had efficient and upper class leadership. Further, the individual and collective petitions sent by the ryots testify to the popular participation of the ryots.

1.10 John Stokes tried to explain these disturbances in terms of religious discord among the natives. The main contention of Stokes was that the *Koots* were the result of the intrigues of Brahmin servants of the Company who disliked the native Christians' involvement in the administration of the region, and that these Brahmins wanted to bring discredit to the government's administration supported by the native Christian officers.<sup>24</sup> To Stokes, the main aim of the Brahmins had been the removal of the Christian servants and the restoration of Brahmin ascendancy in the government offices.<sup>25</sup> He argued that the most important instigators of the *koots* were Krishna Row, Rangarow, Vyasarow and Derebyle Ramiah.<sup>26</sup> He also held them responsible for giving complaints against the native Christian servants, especially the Coelhoes - Manoel Coelho (Naib Serishtadar), his brother I.S. Prabhoo (Treasurer), their relative Boniface Fernandes (Police Moonshee), and another Moonshee named Nicolao Prubhoo<sup>27</sup>.

1.11 John Stokes' argument is quite typical of imperialist historiography. He was pushing under the carpet the fact that there was a general discontent among the peasants against Dickinson's administration. Cameron criticised his predecessor's policies and also those of John Stokes' as inexpedient and uncharitable. Stokes himself admitted that the *Jummabundy* of November 1830 was made hastily and that the remission given was negligible<sup>28</sup>. Further, the leaders of the *Koots* were not exclusively Brahmins. One more point that was taken up by Stokes himself is that the number of the native Christians in the Company service was very low when compared to the number of Muslim and Hindu servants in it<sup>29</sup>. In fact, Brahmins were in high government offices and they were given comparatively more representation than the native Christians. The real reason for the Brahmin leaders to organise the *Koots* was that they were also affected by the Company's revenue administration. So, Stokes' contention is unconvincing.

1.12 The position of John Stokes, however, is understandable. The organisers of the *Koots* had sent complaints against the native Christian servants of the Company based on the following grievances:

1. That they did not interpret their petitions to the Collector properly, and
2. That they took bribes.

One does not know how far the first charge is sustainable, there is of course evidence to show that at least one of the Christian servants, Monoel Prabhoo was guilty of taking bribes from the ryots.<sup>30</sup> He is also stated to have helped the Government by persuading the ryots to give up their recalcitrant ways.<sup>31</sup> Such solitary cases of loyal servants, who were accidentally also Christian must have influenced Stokes in generalising about the entire Christian community in South Kanara: "The native Christians of South Kanara form a valuable connecting link between the Hindus and their European superiors. In language and in local information, they assimilate with the former, in religion and education, with the latter".<sup>32</sup> It need not be assumed that the entire Christian community formed a collaborating class of the Company administration in South Kanara and that the traditionally dominant communities including the Brahmins, Bunts and Muslims grew jealous of them.<sup>33</sup> This is typically in the nature of the imperialist historiography which sought to play one community against the other as an aspect of their policy of divide and rule, instances of which are amply available in the context of almost all other areas under the British rule in India.<sup>34</sup>

1.13 As soon as Cameron assumed charge as the Collector, he ordered an enquiry into the charges against the Christian servants and he punished them for their malpractices. For instance, Manoel Prabhoo was charged with bribery, and when Cameron passed a decree against him, he resigned in March 1831.<sup>35</sup> I.S. Coelho was dismissed from service. He was held responsible for the deficiency occurred in a remittance of treasury dispatched from Mangalore to the Presidency in January 1830.<sup>36</sup>

1.14 The leaders of the *Koots* were punished by the Government. John Stokes observed that Kanara had so often been the scene of revolts against their administration and that he wanted to make the handling of this particular incident a warning to the native inhabitants.<sup>37</sup> The result was the unjust dismissal of Government Officers. Krishna Row was examined by Stokes and was dismissed on 8th December, 1831.<sup>38</sup> Dickinson ordered the Tahsildar of Mangalore to attach the property of some of the defaulters.<sup>39</sup> Dickinson also issued warrants for the apprehension of 16 persons who were considered to be the ring leaders in Mangalore.<sup>40</sup> Besides, many other important officers were also dismissed from service.<sup>41</sup> The rebel peasants were asked to sign a *moochilka* (an agreement in writing), in which they agreed that they would not rise in rebellion for the second time until a fresh *Jummabundy* is fixed.<sup>42</sup> In 1839, on the basis of the exhaustive report given by C.R. Cotton (Collector of Kanara in 1834-35), about the activities of Krishna Row and his other friends, the Government annulled the decisions of Stokes and declared that the dismissed servants were not guilty of instigating the *koots* and that they were eligible for public employment.<sup>43</sup>

1.15 Even after these peasant uprisings, the colonial government did not introduce any ameliorative measure which would really help the ryots in periods of economic crisis. John Stokes, as a temporary measure, recommended remissions to those ryots who could not pay their revenue to the Government. In April 1831, Cameron suggested to increase the powers of the Collector and the Magistrate and declare the *Koots* as illegal.<sup>44</sup> In April 1831, Thomas Boileaw, Assistant Judge of Kanara, recommended that the only decided method to check these tumults was by continuing to adopt conciliatory measures to those who would take advantage of the distresses of others to endeavour, to obtain undue remissions for themselves.<sup>45</sup>

1.16 These protests of 1830-'31 were directed against the revenue administration of the company. The most important reason for these rebellions was the high exaction of land revenue by the Government. The burden of the ryots was aggravated by a large number of taxes like customs, village taxes, courts and stamps and also the prevalence of salt and tobacco monopoly. The unfavourable economic condition aggravated the hardships of the peasants. These rebellions are to be looked upon primarily as 'tax rebellions'. The ryots showed considerable organisational ability and defied the Colonial Government. Its leadership was from the higher echelons, and that too from those who also had been part of the bureaucracy, so much so that the British often tended to believe that the whole problem was provoked by bureaucratic jealousies, or at worst, by the religious animosities. After all, the British were keen on defending their administration. Bureaucratic rivalries and religious animosities can be seized as convenient alibis and people like John Stokes tried precisely this to cover up certain embarrassing facts relating to the agrarian order. But the surface phenomena even though they may conceal what lay deeper, cannot long be presented as substitutes for basic realities. Though these movements were not successful, they point to the contradictions of the revenue administration of the Company and the unenviable condition of the peasants of the region under the colonial rule.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The author is indebted to Dr. B Surendra Rao, Reader, Dept. of studies in History, Mangalore University, for his valuable suggestions.
- 1a. *Koot* or *Koota* in Kannada means an union or assembly. In this context *Koot* refers to union or assemblage of peasants expressing their grievances against and seeking redress from the Company Government.
2. Eric Stokes quoted in C.A. Bayly (Ed), *The Peasant Armed: The Indian Revolt of 1857*, Oxford, 1986, p. 218.
3. Sunil Sen, "The Rise of the Peasant", Presidential Address, Modern Indian History, *PIHC*, 1985, p. 2.
4. Private proprietary right manifested itself in the form of "*mulawarg*" and this has been a peculiar feature of land holding in South Kanara. See B.H. Baden Powell, *The Land Systems of British India*, vol. III, Oxford, 1892, p. 147, John Stuncock, *Madras District Manuals, South Kanara*, vol. I Madras, 1894, p. 118; S. Sundararaja Iyengar, *Land Tenures in the Madras Presidency*, Madras, 1916, p. 32.
5. The Pre-British system of land assessment in South Kanara was *bijawari*. *Bijawari* means extent of land computed according to the quantity of seed required to be sown in it.
6. T. Thomas to Madras Board of Revenue (hereafter *BOR*), 17-6-1823, *Proceedings of the Madras*



- Board of Revenue* (hereafter *PMBR*), 26-6-1823, Vol. no. 952, p. 5, 102.
7. For a detailed analysis of the revenue administration and its consequence, see N. Shyam Bhat, "South Kanara 1799-1860: A Study in Colonial Administration and Regional Response", unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, Mangalore University, 1987.
  8. John Stokes was appointed as special Commissioner to inquire into the causes and happening of the *Koots* and suggest recommendations to the Government. See John Stokes' letter to *BOR*, 12-2-1832, in his *Report on Revision of Assessment, and on the Disturbances Known as Koots in Kanara 1830-31* (hereafter *Report on John Stokes*) (Mangalore, 1885), p. 25. Also see A.J. Hudleston's (Sub-Collector of Kanara) letter to the Collector of Kanara in *PMBR*, 20-1-1831, vol. No. 1275, p. 1236.
  9. A. Sarada Raju, *Economic Conditions in the Madras Presidency 1800-1850*, Madras, 1941, pp. 225-'40.
  10. P.J. Thomas, *Economic Depression in the Madras Presidency 1820-'54*, in *Journal of the Madras University*, vol. VI, No. 1, 1934, pp. 219-'41.
  11. K. Abhishankar (Ed.), *Karnataka State Gazetteer, South Kanara District*, Bangalore, 1973, p. 68.
  12. H. Dickinson to the Secretary to Government, 1-2-1831, *PMBR*, 10-2-1831, vol. No. 1277, pp. 1837-'38; Proceedings of the Madras Revenue Department (hereafter *PMRD*), 8-2-1831, vol. No. 363, pp. 515-'16.
  13. "Report of John Stokes", *op.cit.*, p. 27 and p. 107.
  14. *PMRD*, 8-2-1831, vol. No. 363; *PMBR* 31-3-1831, vol. No. 1281, p. 3290.
  15. "Report of John Stokes", *op.cit.*, p. 25.
  16. *Ibid*, pages 114, 104, 108, 30, 110, 117, 110, 108, 108, 112 and 112 respectively.
  17. *Ibid*, p. 112; The examination of Derebyle Ramiah, 2-12-1831, para 39, No. 158, in John Stokes' "Canara" (Summary of the enquiry made into certain charges against the Head Seristadar Kristna Row, his brother Rungarow, and other Brahmins on the Principal Collectors Establishment, for abetting the *Koots* and encouraging the Royots (Ryots) prefer false complaints against the Native Christian Servants), 17-1-1833, in Madras Judicial Consultation, 18-4-1833.
  18. Examination of Hattiyangadi Gangadharayya, 22-12-1831, para 81, No. 180, in John Stokes, "Canara"; Examination of Rangayya, 8-5-1832, para 257, No. 264, in John Stokes, "Canara".
  19. D.N. Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950*, New Delhi, 1983.
  20. "Report of John Stokes", *op.cit.*, pp. 114-'16.
  21. *Ibid*, p. 115.
  22. *Ibid*, pp. 117-'18.
  23. *Ibid*, p. 118.
  24. *Ibid*, p. 109.
- This was also the view held by the administrators of the British Empire in a later period. See John Sturrock, *op.cit.*, p. 105. Interestingly even the later incarnation of the Gazetteer unwittingly perpetuates this version. See K. Abhishankar, (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 69.
25. "Report of John Stokes", *op.cit.*, p. 109.
  26. *Ibid*, p. 104.
- Among the three who were mentioned, Derebyle Ramiah was not, interestingly, a Brahmin.
27. *Ibid*, p. 119.
  28. *Ibid*, p. 108.
  29. *Ibid*, p. 122.
  30. Examination of Arkula Krishnappa Hegde, 9-11-1831, para 3, No. 109, in John Stokes, "Canara".
  31. "Report of John Stokes" *op.cit.*, p. 112.
  32. *Ibid*, p. 122.
  33. We had taken this position in an earlier paper.. N. Shyam Bhat, "The Peasant Unrests in Kanara 1830-'31, paper presented in the ICHR Seminar, Department of History, University of Madras (1985).
  34. Romila Thapar *et al.*, *Communalism and the writing of Indian History*, New Delhi, 1977; Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India*, New Delhi, 1984, pp. 209-'36.
  35. "Report of John Stokes", *op.cit.* p. 120
  36. *Ibid*.
  37. *Ibid*, p. 118.
  38. *Ibid*, p. 105.
  39. *Ibid*, p. 112.
  40. *Ibid*, p. 113.
  41. *PMBR*, 6-6-1833, vol. No. 1368, p. 7128.
  42. "Report of John Stokes", *op.cit.*, p. 113.

43. *PMBR*, 28-3-1839, vol. No. 1652, pp. 3982-'985.
44. *Proceedings of the Madras Judicial Department*, 19-4-1831, vol. No. 238A, p. 892.
45. *Ibid*, 20-5-1831, vol. No. 239B, . 1303.