

## LOCAL RESISTANCE AGAINST THE BRITISH :

### A Case Study of Vittal Raja, 1799-1800

N. SHYAM BHAT\*

The Fourth Anglo-Mysore war of 1799 saw the fall of Tipu Sultan in Mysore and was followed by the Treaty of Srirangapattana (22nd June, 1799). As per the provisions of this treaty, South Kanara was annexed to the Madras Presidency. The British annexation of South Kanara was not over without any local resistance movements. The annexation came as a challenge to the traditional authority or chieftains (*palegars*) of the region. It threatened to put an end to the traditional privileges which they had enjoyed for so long. The Rajas of Kumbala, Nileshwar and Vittal had independently opposed the British annexation of their hereditary possessions. In this paper an attempt is made to study the resistance which the Raja of Vittal offered against the British annexation of his territory.

The origin and early history of this chieftaincy of South Kanara is shrouded in obscurity. The earliest epigraph that makes mention of this ruling family of Vittal is dated 1436 A. D.<sup>1</sup> They continued their rule as feudatories under the control of the Ikkeri Nayakas, when Venkatappa Nayaka fixed the actual <sup>amount</sup> of tribute to <sup>be paid</sup> him.<sup>2</sup> The Rajas of Vittal continued to be hereditary proteges of the Bidanur Government, till Haidar Ali carried his victorious arms to South Kanara in 1763 and forced him to accept his political suzerainty. In 1763-'64 the gross public revenue of the area

---

\*Research fellow, Dept. of History, Mangalore University,  
Mangalore-574199

possessed by the Raja of Vittal was Star Pagodas 4590, Fanams 43 and Annas 54.<sup>3</sup> Out of this amount the Raja got as his share only Star Pagodas 121, Fanams 42 and Annas 34 after paying the share of the state and also deducting the collection charges. But the Raja was getting together from his private estate and by way of the voluntary unauthorised presents made by his landlords an amount of Star pagodas 927, Fanams 40 and Annas 39 per annum. The amount that was allowed to the Raja as his share was evidently meagre, and notwithstanding his title, he had been reduced, even in the early years of Haidar's rule, to the position of a rent-collecting agent. Despite his precarious income and apparent hollowness of power, the Vittal Raja was not abjectly inconsequential. He was a *Raja*, and enjoyed a status and influence which the traditional elites of his kind tend to command among the people. This was duly taken note of by those who sought to use his services.

After two years of Haidar Ali's annexation of South Kanara, in 1765 he increased the rent of the Vittal Hegades (Rajas) by fifty percent, and this revenue settlement served as a prelude to the hostilities between the two.<sup>4</sup> It soon became apparent when Achuta Hegade of Vittal sided with the British in the First Anglo-Mysore War of 1767-'69. Soon after the war, Haidar took revenge against the Raja and forced him to take shelter under the British at Tellicherry as a pensioner of the Company Government, where he drew an yearly grant of Rupees One Hundred upto 1792 and later Rupees Two Hundred per annum.<sup>5</sup> In all the three successive Anglo-Mysore Wars, the Vittal Raja collaborated with the British against the rulers of Mysore - Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan. As a refugee under the British, Achuta Hegade made occasional incursions into his hereditary provinces. On one such occasion in 1784, Tipu Sultan captured him at Vittal and beheaded

him. Achuta Hegade was succeeded by Ravivarma Narasimha Domba Hegade at Tellicherry. As soon as the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War broke out, Domba Hegade moved to Vittal and worked for the restoration of his *status quo*. He plundered the Srimad Anantheshwara temple of Manjeshwar in Kanara (presently situated in the Kasaragod Taluk of Kerala State) after an order had been sent to him from Tellicherry to put a stop to all further activities.<sup>6</sup> Gururaja Bhatt holds the opinion that this attack was launched to recover the amount due from the temple authorities and also to add up to his half-famished purse.<sup>7</sup> Having secured the riches of the Temple, he walked off to Tellicherry. Thus, the Raja of Vittal leaned towards the British from the 1760's to 1799 and these years marked the first phase of his collaboration with the foreigners. The British also showed an inclination towards him, for, the Raja though a fugitive, had a hereditary social standing. His moral support meant the support of a large number of natives who stood for him. The phase of collaboration ended in 1799 when Tipu Sultan was overthrown by the British.

A rough classification of the revolts during British rule yields five types of action in terms of goals, ideology and methods of organisation and among them the first one is 'restorative' rebellions to drive out the British and restore earlier rulers and social relations.<sup>8</sup> Although transformative, these 'nativistic' or restorative movements are essentially revivalistic and their ideology back-ward looking.<sup>9</sup> Such movements may also be called as 'primary resistances'. Primary resistance, abstractly defined, connotes the forcible, instinctual attempt of an unmodified traditional structure to extrude a foreign body.<sup>10</sup> A large number of such movements took place in India in the late half of the Eighteenth and early part of the Nineteenth century. Such local resistance movements took place against the British, for, their

policy of territorial expansion undermined the power and status of the traditional authorities or local rajas in India. The resistance organised by the Raja of Vittal also falls into the category of a primary resistance or a restorative movement. He was disposed to be friendly with the British so long as he hoped to use this friendship against the depredations of Tipu. But once the spectre of Tipu was buried, the Raja of Vittal felt apprehensive of the dangers that his allies themselves presented. Soon enough he realised that his annexation of South Kanara would also mean the loss of what independence or influence he had enjoyed, and that there was no ghost of a chance of recovering his power which he had so fondly been hoping for. The chief motive behind his movement was self-interest, a desire to regain his feudal rights and privileges. It was a fight against the new political order which would give birth to a new social structure in which he would lose his former identity. Though the movement was anti-British in character, it was essentially a backward looking movement, and hence essentially revivalistic. Such a bid is usually followed by the imposition of colonial rule in response.<sup>11</sup> The restorative movement of the Raja of Vittal falls under that category where the ruler himself leads the rebellion for fear of dispossession (or immediately after having been dispossessed) and this may be distinguished from somebody else—say a brave peasant or a gallant soldier—championing the cause of the traditional ruler who was stripped off his power and dignity (who himself could do no more than let out a pathetic moan or whimper).

The Raja of Vittal, Ravivarma Narasimha Domba Hegade, ignored the summons from the Commissioners of Malabar to give up the Company's arms and returned to Vittal (on 15th December, 1799 from Tellieherry) with a party of about 150 armed followers and joined his nephew

there. He took over the management of the District and collected the revenue, maintaining his position according to Munro, entirely by terror.<sup>12</sup> With the idea of reviving his fortunes, early in 1800 he combined with other disaffected elements in South Kanara. He associated with one Timma or Kristna Naik who had been a petty officer in Tipu's fort at Bekal (presently situated in the Kasaragod taluk of Kerala State), who was taken into the Company's service on his undertaking to procure recruits for the Bomby army. But Timma Naik persuaded about two hundred and four of his men to go off with the Vittal Raja and join Subba Rao, a former Sheristadar of Coimbatore, who had set up a pretender at Bailangadi (in South Kanara) under the name of Fateh Hyder, a natural son of Tipu Sultan.<sup>13</sup> The person selected to play the role of Fateh Hyder was Mahatab Khan. Thus, Vittal Hegade, Timma Naik, Subba Rao and Mahtab Khan (Fateh Hyder) rose into prominence as the leaders of local resistance against the Company's rule in South Kanara. As an experienced soldier in the service of Tipu Sultan, Subba Rao assumed the command of the rebel parties. These rebel chiefs sent their emissaries in the name of Fateh Hyder, son of Tipu and prisoner at Vellore, to the villages, and enlisted the support of the disbanded troops of Mysore and the deserters from the forces of the Company. Thus there came into existence a rebel league in the western region of Kannadana<sup>14</sup>. Their idea was to surprise Jamalabad<sup>15</sup> and in that they succeeded, as a young British officer, who had just arrived to relieve the garrison, was sleeping for the night at the foot of the rock with all his men except a Nayak's party, intending probably to march the next day into the fort.<sup>16</sup>

Sir Thomas Munro, the first Collector of South Kanara considered that one of the objects of the Vittal Hegade was to induce the Government to make over to him the management of Vittal, and as his success in such an attempt would

at once have led to the revival of a number of similar long extinguished claims in every part of Kanara,, he considered it necessary to call on Colonel Hart, the officer commanding the province, to proceed against him without delay as a rebel.<sup>17</sup> He also stated that as the inhabitants of the district were mainly peaceful Brahmins and Bunts who had no attachment for the Hegade, a small force would be sufficient to deal with him. In the mean-time, on 7th May 1800, Subba Rao with the assistance of Vittal Hegade attacked the temple at Uppinangadi, in which the Tahsildar of Kadaba was holding his office. The Tahsildar escaped by crossing the river in the dark and several patels, who were there at the time, also got away. Subba Rao then marched on Buntwal, a commercial centre in South Kanara, which he plundered and afterwards took up his quarters at Puttur and began to collect the revenue.<sup>18</sup> Sir Thomas Munro was not slow to take any action and he sent an army under Lieutenant Colonel Cumine to Jamalabad and it attacked the fort on 27th April 1800. The natives headed by Timma Naik gave a stiff resistance in the beginning. Anxious to seize Timma Naik, the British employed Raman Nair, an influential chieftain of Bekal. In October, Raman Nair proposed an hunting excursion to which Timma Naik gave his consent. In the course of their hunting, Timma Naik was seized at Bekal. He was executed and his party dispersed. In return for his service, Raman Nair received a reward of 590 Rupees and a public approbation from the British. The British stormed the fort and regained possession of Jamlabad.<sup>19</sup> By this time Munro had raised a body of 200 armed peons and placed them under the orders of Kumara Heggade of Dharmasthala, one of the Patels of Bantwal, who had rendered valuable services in the capture of Jamalabad. Kumara Heggade marched against Subba Rao and defeated him on the 11th of May 1800. But he was shot through his arm, which prevented him from dispersing the insurgents.<sup>20</sup> But on the 16th the English succeeded in defeating Subba Rao

and took possession of Puttur and Bantwal. On the 15th of July Subba Rao was put to death. Fateh Hyder was also surprised and routed and on 18th June Munro reported that "the force of banditti is now entirely dispersed every where except in Vittal".<sup>21</sup> Kumara Heggade was rewarded with a present of 10 Bahadry Pagodas and the fine of 40 Bahadry Pagodas which he owed to the Government was written off.

Munro's next task was to subdue the Hegade of Vittal. On 9th July a force of about 859 armed men was sent to Vittal, defeated the rebels and took the whole of Hegade's family. This force was joined by a party of one hundred sepoy under Captain Bruce, sent at Munro's request, and on 18th July Vittal Hegade gave himself up. He and members of his family (9 including his nephew) were apprehended. Soon after his capture, Munro wrote to Colonel Close, the Resident in Mysore: "We may now by making an example of him and his associates secure Canara from internal disturbances in the future.... It is the mistaken notion of observing on this coast towards every petty chief of a District all the ceremony and attention that is due to a sovereign which keeps alive idle and dangerous pretensions which it ought to be our aim to extinguish".<sup>22</sup> A court martial promptly tried the rebels and ordered execution in the most public and exemplary manner. Lieutenant Colonel Mignan carried out the executions of Vittal Raja, his two nephews, brother-in-law, Harrikar, Shanubogue and a Jamedar who commanded his armed adherents on the 22nd of August 1800 and five other strong supporters of the Raja were hanged on the Yed-Gah Hill (present Light House Hill), in Mangalore on 25th August 1800.<sup>23</sup> With this event and the fall of Jamalabad, all disturbances created by the Vittal Raja and his allies came to an end. After this Munro wrote to Cockburn: "His defeat (Vittal Raja) and seizure were

entirely owing to the zeal of the inhabitants; and I have no doubt that I should be able, with their assistance, to get the better of any other vagabond raja that should venture to rebel".<sup>24</sup>

Though the local resistance movement led by the Raja of Vittal was a failure, at one time it caused enough headache to the British in South Kanara, where Sir Thomas Munro experienced great difficulty in making his first revenue settlement. The ryots refused to attend the settlement, save under certain conditions and sending him a paper wherever he went, 'a kind of bill of rights', the terms of which they required to be conceded before they would discuss the subject of the assessment.<sup>25</sup> Munro in his letter to Cockburn wrote: "though I talk of being busy, I don't pretend that I am doing much, but that I meet with a great deal of trouble in doing little—for, besides the confusion and disorder kept up by the open and secret opposition of a tribe of rajahs and their adherents, the rayets themselves are a most unruly and turbulent race...they absconded when peons were sent for them. They almost starved some of the amildars I had detached, by preventing them from getting fire and water, and whenever I approached a village, the inhabitants went off to another, so that I was sometimes several weeks in a district without seeing one of them".<sup>26</sup>

The quelling of resistance was followed by the acquisition of property of the Vittal Raja. All property except his private ones were acquired by the British in lieu of which the family was granted a yearly pension of Rupees 6019 and 1 Anna.<sup>27</sup> It was slightly less than 1/5's of the gross annual revenue of the property seized from the Hegade.

The local resistance movement led by the Raja of Vittal was a bold bid made by him to revive his traditional aut-

hority. It succeeded the first phase of his collaboration with the British which lasted from the 1760's to 1799. The Raja was able to mobilise the support of his peasant subjects mainly because of his hereditary authority and social standing and not because of his actual power and control over them. His prominent allies were Timma Naik of Bekal, Subba Rao and Fateh Hyder. The Raja was also supported by some armed men and native people. If some of the natives had supported the Raja, it was quite possible that large number of the ryots might have made use of the troubled situation to get an advantageous land revenue settlement from the new Government. Sir Thomas Munro himself had acknowledged the difficulty which he experienced in making the first land revenue settlement. When such was the situation in the District, Munro's statement that 'the defeat and seizure of the Vittal Raja were entirely owing to the zeal of the inhabitants' should be taken with a pinch of salt. This is not to say that there was no pro-British faction among the natives. Kumara Hegade of Dharmasthala, the Tahsildar of Kadaba and Raman Nair of Bekal were prominent among the natives who collaborated with the British. Anyhow, it should be noted that the suppression of the resistance movement was not so much due to the native help as it was to the supreme military strength of the British.

The anti-British league of which the Raja of Vittal was a part too, presented some contradictions and brittleness. Some of the allies of the Raja were aliens to the region, and were all bold adventurers who dared to make hay when the sun shone. The Vittal Raja could reasonably hope to win the sympathy of his people owing to the status he enjoyed, but the more active support to his cause was difficult to locate. The Raja was too powerless to buy it, and the people had no substantial reason to take a belligerently anti-

British stance. For, the British rule had not yet taken any definite shape and had not yet touched the lives of the peasants. When the Raja led a move to secure his restoration, some of them might have declared their support to him. But soon this support to the Raja evidently lost its conviction, if ever it had any ; they must have realised before long that they were not indeed fighting their battle. The tragedy of such restorative movements is that the initial ardency and involvement, based on emotional bonds, tend to cool off all too quickly, leaving a long trail of casualties or martyrs. The Raja of Vittal was a part of this tragedy.

#### References :

1. Gururaja Bhatt, P.—*Studies in Tuluva History and Culture* (Manipal, 1975).— p. 130. Cf. Ganapathi Rao Iigal M. *Dakshina Kannada Jilleya Pracheena Itihasa* (Kannada, 1923) pp. 361-362.
2. Ganapathi Rao Iigal M. *op. cit.*, p. 303.
3. J. G. Ravenshaw to the Principal Collector of Malabar, November 1803, Proceedings of the Madras Board of Revenue (hereafter PMBR), 28th March 1839, Vol. No. 1652, p. 4121 ; Cf The local accounts are kept in Pagodas fanams and annas ; 16 annas make 1 fanam, and 10 fanams 1 pagoda. See— *The Land Assessment And The Landed Tenures of Canara*, (Mangalore, 1853), p. 87 ; Cf One Star Pagoda is equal in value to Rs. 3.50. See- PMBR, 5th July 1819, Vol. No. 826, p.5611.
4. Gururaja Bhatt, P.— *op. cit.*, p. 134.
5. Francis Buchanan.—*A Journey From Madras Through the*

*Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, Vol. II (1870), p. 216. Cf. Kurup, K.K.N., *History of the Tellicherry Factory (1683-1794)* (1985), p. 216.

6. John G. Ravenshaw to G. Garrow, 27.8.1801, PMBR, 7-9-1801, Vol. No. 297, pp. 11.448-'49. Cf. Sir Thomas Munro to William Petrie, 16-6-1800, PMBR, 14-7-1800, Vol. No. 257, p. 6310.
7. Gururaja Bhatta, P.— *op. cit.*, p. 136.
8. Kathleen Gough.— *Indian Peasant Uprisings*. Published in Desai, A. R. (Ed.) *Peasant Struggles in India*. (New Delhi, 1985), p. 94 ; The other four are : 1) Religious movement for the liberations of a region or an ethnic group under a new form of government, (2) Social banditry (to use Hobsbawm's term), (3) Terrorist Vengeance, with ideas of meeting out collective justice, and (4) Mass insurrections for the redress of particular grievances.
9. Dhanagare, D. N.— *Peasant Movements In India*. 1920-1950 (1983) p. 213.
10. Eric Stokes.— *The Peasant And The Raj*, (1978); p. 120
11. *Ibid*, p. 123.
12. Sir Thomas Munro to William Petris, 16. 6. 1800; PMBR, 14. 7. 1800, Vol. No. 257, pp. 6310-'11.
13. Sturrock, John.— *Madras District Manuals, South Kanara*, Vol.I (1894), pp. 79-80.

14. Rajayyan, K.-*South Indian Rebellion: The First War of Independence 1800-1801* (1971), p. 101., Cf. Purushothama B.-*Mackenzie Kaifiyathugalu* (Kannada, 1985), pp. 72-76.
15. Jamalabad is a high rock near Belthangadi. Struck with the facilities of an impregnable stronghold, Tipu Sultan constructed a fort on the top of it. The fort was captured by a party of British troops in October 1799. Sir Thomas Munro in his letter to his Brother Alexander dated 28th May 1800 described Jamalabad as a very strong hill fort, stronger than Savendroog or any other he had ever seen. Gleig, G. R. *The Life of Sir Thomas Munro*, Vol. I, P. 248.
16. Francis Buchanan.- *op. cit.*, p. 251.
17. John Sturrock.- *op. cit.*, p. 80
18. *Ibid* p. 80
19. Proceedings of the Madras Military Department, 11.11. 1800, Vol. No. 275, pp. 2538-'40
20. PMBR, 3-7-1800, Vol. 255, p.p. 5917-'18.
21. Beaglehole, T. H.-*Thoms Munro and the Development of Administration in Madras 1792-1819: The Origins of the MUNRO SYSTEM*, (1966), p. 40.
22. An undated letter from Munro to Lt. Col Close, Proceedings of the Madras Political Department (hereafter PMPD), 8.8.1800, Vol. No. 1-B, pp. 388-389.

23. G. Mignan to Josiah Webbe, 26.8.1800, PMPD, 9.9.1800, Vol. No. 1-B, p. 487.
24. Gleig, G. R.- *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 270,
25. Sir Alexander J. Arbuthnot (Ed.), *Sir Thomas Munro* (1886), p. 57.
26. Gleig, G. R.- *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 237-239.
27. PMBR, 3.2.1812, Vol. No. 562, p. 1335.