

Rebellion of Kalyanaswamy (1834-37): A Case of Local Protest Against British Rule

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The Rebellion of Kalyanaswamy, which had sent waves of excitement and consternation in southern parts of South Kanara in the 1830's, still retains its hold in the popular memory of the region. It has provided a theme for 'Yakshagana' as also for some of the well-known novels. But in doing so it has evoked conflicting sentiments: Kalyanaswamy is either portrayed as a wicked free-booter, spreading destruction wherever he went or as a noble 'freedom fighter' who had visions of a free country, purged of its colonial oppressions. These descriptions, interesting though they are, are too naive and simplistic to inspire credence. We should be as wary of colonial cynicism as of nationalistic effusion. A closer look at the socio-economic conditions that produced the rebellion would be more rewarding than simplistic descriptions. Kalyanaswamy's rebellion may be looked upon as one of the early cases of resistance against the British. Prof. S. C. Sarkar writing in 1955 had pointed out, "... that British Power in this country, even in early days, had to contend almost ceaselessly with resistance from large numbers of people in very many parts was not indeed unknown, but this aspect of our history has not yet been adequately dealt with in a factual, concrete manner."¹ Today this area of study is no longer new; but it still has lot of potentialities. Kalyanaswamy's rebellion is one of the well-known but little-studied case of local resistance against the British, and this paper is an attempt to present it in proper perspective.

South Kanara passed into British hands in 1799. But Coorg enjoyed its precarious independence till 1834, when the last of the Haleri Chiefs, Chikkaveerarajendra

(1820-34) was deposed. His disloyalty and brazen misrule were apparently sufficient justification for the British decision to terminate the Haleri rule, and Lt. Col. J. S. Fraser, the Political Agent at Mercara formally issued the Proclamation (11th April, 1834) annexing Coorg into the company dominion.² The resistance of the Raja was weak and ineffectual. Col. Fraser also proclaimed that the socio-religious systems and customs of the people would be respected, but it was only on paper. In reality, social, economic and even territorial changes were introduced under the veil of administrative convenience.

After the annexation of Coorg, the districts of Amara Sullia, Puttur and Buntwala (the territories below the Ghats), were transferred to the district of Kanara, ostensibly for administrative convenience.³ But it created severe problems to the inhabitants of these transferred districts. The first change was in the mode of payment of revenue to the Government. Under the Coorg Rajas, the assessment was paid in kind. The Collector of Mangalore now demanded cash payment. As a result of this, the peasants of these districts had to sell their products to realise cash and remit the revenue to the Government. They had to sell their products after the harvest, when the price would be generally low. In addition to that they were exploited by the middlemen and also by the merchants. Dr. Purushothama B., is of the opinion that these merchants were the konkani of Buntwal.⁴ This community which performed the 'bania' role in the local contexts was naturally disposed to look at the changes favourably and as such viewed the uprising with horror and hostility.

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These new changes in the economy placed the peasants at the mercy of the merchant class or other 'middlemen.'

The peasants also resented the system of levying taxes on the sale of agricultural products and items of day to day consumption. This had the effect of jacking up the prices of export items like arecanut and pepper. When their export market was hit, unsold stocks brought down their prices, thereby hitting the peasants hard. Further they had to pay high prices for the goods of primary necessity like salt and tobacco for taxes were levied on them also. These market problems and the Government's demand of revenue in cash which the peasants of closed, traditional economy were unaccustomed to, naturally produced sufficient grounds of resentment. Kalyanaswamy's proclamations, made just before the rebellion included abolition of the collection of land revenue for three years and the abolition of taxes on salt and tobacco if he became the King.⁵ This is clearly an indication of the oppressive taxation system of the British in the Amara Sullia and Puttur regions.

The evangelist ambitions of Col. Fraser had also evoked strong sentiments of suspicion among the local people. This intention of Fraser is clear from his letter of June 10th, 1834 sent to the Governor General's Secretary MacNaughton.

All these factors made the peasants of Amara Sullia and Puttur areas hostile to the British, who were looked upon as hated intruders. They believed that the Haleri rule represented happier days that seemed to be now consigned to the past, which they hoped to rescue. This was a typical mode of defence which a closed traditional society adopts in the face of an intrusion of a foreign factor.

Kalyanaswamy's rebellion in South Kanara may be looked upon as a spill-over from Coorg politics. Soon after annexation (1834), efforts were set on foot in Coorg and Kanara to expel the British. This resistance movement was led by three leaders in succession Aparampara Swamiji and Kalyanaswamy in Coorg and later Puttabassapah in South Kanara.⁶ The person who gave inspiration to the rebellion of Kalyanaswamy was Swami

Aparampara. In 1835 he appeared in Coorg and claimed that he was a legal heir to the throne of Coorg. A little later he moved to Sullia and the surrounding areas where he was able to influence the people. The object of Aparampara was to attack and occupy the Fort of Mercara on the 5th December, 1836. But the British smelt the danger and soon imprisoned Aparampara. His mantle, however, fell on the shoulders of his friend Kalyanaswamy. But Diwan Ponnappa helped the British in imprisoning him also. It was in the beginning of 1837. But Kalyanaswamy and his supporters were able to goad the people of Amara Sullia to rise in revolt against the British. They prepared the minds of the people for a future and welcome reception by liberal promises.⁷ Kedambadi Rama Gowda of Sullia was the person who was primarily responsible for the organisation of this rebellion in South Kanara. The people of South Kanara never knew that Kalyanaswamy was caught. So Rama Gowda selected one Puttabassapah, a peasant of Shanivara Sante in Hemmani Village, to play the role of Kalyanaswamy.

Thus Kalyanaswamy (real name Puttabasava or Puttabassapah) with his right hand man Rama Gowda started his activities in the early months of 1837. Kalyanaswamy was declared as the 'Rajah' by his men. He claimed to be a member belonging to the erstwhile Haleri family. This was to get not only a legal sanction to his claim for the throne of Coorg, but also to win over mass support. Further, the proclamations made by Kalyanaswamy not only shows his skill in popularising his movement, but an indication of the grievances that the people had in the British administration. On 30th March 1837 Kalyanaswamy proclaimed that if he became the ruler, (a) he would stop the collection of revenue for the first three years, and (b) he would abolish the duties on commodities of day to day consumption. M. Lewin says 'the selection of Lower Coorg by Puttabassapah as a place to mature his plans, was, because of its secluded situation and because it contained a body of man, capable of enabling him, to make a good beginning; he knew also, that the inhabitants had many real, or

supposed grievances, and that a desire was cherished among them, of separating from their present Government, they were willing agents in rebellion, and he could no where expect to find equal means, of creating a shock so sudden and effectual."⁹ Kalyanaswamy made his aims very clear in his proclamations. His aim was to expel the British and reinstate the rule of the Haleri dynasty. Commissioner Cotton who was appointed by the Government to enquire into the nature of the rebellion says "with respect to the ulterior objects of the conspirators, I have no hesitation in declaring them to have been the destruction of the British power to such extent and in such direction as possible in the anarchy which they were about to set on foot, trusting that when the fire was once kindled the flames would spread with that rapidity which marked the first attempt of Aparampara in 1835. Amongst the ulterior objects the 'Throne of Nuggur' may perhaps be specified, though it also appears to have rested on distant hopes and circumstances, rather than on any arrangements previously prepared.

The immediate object of the conspirators was doubtlessly the subversion of the British power in Coorg and the re-establishment of a Hindu Dynasty in that country."¹⁰

In the course of the rebellion the Government buildings and stores *en route* were taken possession of, the tappal communication closed, and the public mails fell into the hands of the rebels.¹¹ They were hard on the natives who supported the British cause. This is clear from the proclamation of Kalyanaswamy. This proclamation of 5th April 1837 said: "The troops of the Swamy having arrived to fight a battle against the English, you are directed to join us, taking up arms and other weapons which you may possess and if you act otherwise, the whole of your family will be beheaded. There is a force consisting of 12 lakhs of troops expected and consequently you will send messages instantly as to your joining the force of the Swamy, as if otherwise, you will suffer the consequences. If you will all join, you will be protected. You must write with all haste on the receipt of this

Niroop".¹¹ The exaggerated account of the strength of the troops was evidently meant to assure the people that the rebellion was indeed a massive one and that it was bound to succeed. This assurance was meant to win over those who were perhaps sitting on the fence. It should be noted that the rebels assassinated Atlur Ramappayya. Ramappayya (Brother of Diwan Laxminarayanayya) was a loyal supporter of the British and revealed all the secret plans of Kalyanaswamy and his supporters to them. Similarly, the three Diwans—Laxminarayanayya, Apparanda Bopu and Cheppudira Ponnappa who supported the British were hated and opposed by the rebels.

The popular support that Kalyanaswamy and his supporters were able to get is clear from the opinion of Blair. In his Report to the Chief Secretary dated 14th March, 1842, he says: "of the motives which led these ryots to desert their allegiance to the British Government, some it is probable were induced by intimidation, but the greater number there is no doubt volunarily joined the rebel chiefs attracted by the liberal promises, held out in their proclamations and believing that out authority in the country was about to be overturned".¹² Mark Cubbon also, in his observations on Cotton's Report stresses the popular support to the rebellion.

Thus the British administrators like Cotton, M. Lewin, Mark Cubbon and Blair who studied this case were almost unanimous in their findings; they were convinced of the strong organisation of the rebellion, popular support, peasant involvement, and the object of the rebellion, that is replacement of the British with the old Haleri family. But they took great care to conceal any of the genuine grievances of the people of Kanara in their reports. On the other hand, they tried to hide the facts by saying that there was profound peace in Kanara, and that there was no genuine complaint against their rule. But the veil is too transparent to cover some of the naked realities. However, they were only trying to defend their rule. Infact, the seed of this rebellion was sown in 1834 itself. It had fallen on a good soil too. Kanara had already built up a repu-

tation for what John Stokes called "disgraceful intrigues".¹³ He was reporting on the 'Peasant Assemblages or Koots' of 1830-31, which had given the British some bad headaches.

Kalyanaswamy, the pretender to the throne of Coorg had some good supporters in Kedambadi Rama Gowda, Gudde-mane Appayya, Chetti Kudiya, Kurtu Kudiya, Karanika Subbayya, Shanthayya, Malliah and Anni Gowda. He had the support of a petty Chief Lakkappa Banga of Nandavar. Some of the public servants of the Government also had sided with him.¹⁵ It is true that most of the participants in the rebellion were Gowdas, because Amara Sullia (important centre of the rebels) was mainly inhabited by them. But because of this, condemning it as a mere Gowda-affair, as Rev. G. Richter did is absurd because there were people belonging to other castes like Bunts, Sthanikas, Malekudiyas etc., who also participated in it. The rebellion of Kalyanaswamy lasted for a short period of two months, March and April, 1837. But he and his men covered the Southern parts of South Kanara attacking the British Cutcherries at various places like Bellare, Kasaragod, and Puttur before their final attack of the Collector's office at Mangalore.

Kalyanaswamy was able to keep Mangalore within his possession for some days in the month of April 1837. But it was an ephemeral success and soon the rebellion was suppressed by the British. Many of the participants lost their life. Kalyanaswamy, Kedambadi Rama Gowda and some other leaders escaped for life. The Government proclaimed that it would give rich rewards to the people who supported it in identifying the rebellious men. Thus Rs. 10,000 was proclaimed as a reward for the identification of Kalyanaswamy. By the end of May 1837, Kalyanaswamy, Kedambadi Rama Gowda and some others were all captured and hanged to death. Some active participants like Chetty Kudiya, Kurta Kudiya, Peraje Krishnaiah and Beeranna Bunt were deported to Singapore.¹⁶ Such was the tragic end of the leaders who fought for the redressal of the grievance of their people.

The natives, both ordinary citizens and Government servants who helped the British in identifying the rebel leaders and thereby suppression of the rebellion were richly rewarded by the Government. They were given rewards in the forms of guns, horses, silver and gold medals. The medals were in fact the certificates, for, on them it was written—"For distinguished conduct and loyalty to the British Government, Coorg, April 1837."¹⁷ Further they declared that Ranga Baliga of Buntwal, one of their supporters, would be exempted from any payment of land revenue and that it would be continued for his next three generations. Some others were given free grants of lands. Captain Leehardy was given promotion and his salary was also enhanced. "...In consideration of the vital and valuable services rendered by Dewan Bopan of Coorg and Party, the entire treasure found with the insurgents was given as reward to them."¹⁸

It is surprising to note that the rebellion had no support in Coorg even though the avowed object of the rebels was to reinstate the rule of the Haleri family over Coorg. "...The disappointing feature, however, of this rising was that the people of Coorg had remained loyal to the Government throughout and it was due to this factor that Dewan Bopan was able to trace the leaders of the insurgents and deal a crushing blow to their treasonable operations. The arrested leaders of this serious rising were afterwards tried and given condign punishment."¹⁹ It is pointed out that the British took all pains to thwart the support of Coorg to the rebellion. They also saw to it that there prevailed hatred and disunity among the Gowdas of Amara Sullia and the people of Coorg. This they did by making use of caste differences. Thus, the people of Coorg were won over by the British, who set them against the rebellion of Kalyanaswamy.²⁰

So, the people of Coorg were not keen on the restoration of the Haleri family: They obviously had borne the full brunt of Haleri misrule. So Kalyanaswamy's heroic effort to become the General Monk evoked little enthusiasm with them. But the peasants of Amara Sullia, Bellare and

Puttur, living as they were on the outer periphery of the Haleri rule, must have been spared the experiences which their counterparts had at Coorg proper. While the peasants below the ghats did not have any special reasons to love their Haleri over-lords, they had no strong reason to despise them either. What they were certain was that when annexation took place, the changes that accompanied it were not, in their interests. So, when Kalyanaswamy's call for restoration came, these peasants announced their support to it: they did so more out of the prospects of redemption from the changes that British rule had inflicted on them than with any particular love for the Haleri family.

Thus, when we look at the aims and objectives of Kalyanaswamy and his movement, it is difficult to describe it as a patriotic or nationalist uprising in any modern sense. The people who were involved in it had no progressive ideas of what they should achieve once the British rule in the area was terminated. The avowed object of the insurrection, however, was the restoration of the Haleri Royal family and the old socio-economic order. This slogan was a retrograde slogan. In other words, it was essentially a backward looking movement in the typical mould, of what has been described as 'Primary Resistance'. But they were convinced of the evils which British rule had brought in its train for them, and they revolted against them.

Again Kalyanaswamy should not be looked upon as a plain bandit. Though his activities sometimes took the form of a bold and successful banditry, the more opulent sections of population bearing brunt of his predatory exercises-dacoity was to him not an end in itself. His exactions were meant to keep the rebellion going. His activities resemble 'Social Banditry'. According to E. J. Hobsbawm "the point about social bandits is that they are peasant outlaws whom the lord and

state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberations, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported."²¹ The activities of Kalyanaswamy conform to the above standards: there was a defiance of the authority of State, there was peasant involvement in it, there were leaders in it who were treated as their saviours by a good chunk of peasantry and it was suppressed by State also. In so far as bandits have a 'Programme', it is the defence or restoration of the traditional order of things 'as it should be' (which in traditional societies means as it is believed to have been in some real or mythical past).²² Carlo Giuseppe Rossetti opines that "Banditry can be studied in the context of the crisis which broke out, as a revolt in defence of traditional social and political rights."²³ All these features of social banditry can be noticed in the rebellion of Kalyanaswamy, and hence it can be treated as a case of 'Social Banditry'.

The rebellion of Kalyanaswamy is a typical case of an early local protest against the British rule. In its origin, organisation and failure, it presents all the elements of what may be described as a 'Primary Resistance'.²⁴ It was a typical response of a traditional society against the unsettling effects of the foreign intrusion: beliefs and cherished customs crumble, old economic order is disturbed; it provokes anger and resentment, provides a simple but the all-important promise and plan for the future. It is from these sources that a 'primary resistance' draws its strength and its weakness. Kalyanaswamy's rebellion was a failure. But its study will provide useful insights into the socio-economic milieu of the area which produced it, as much as to the nature of colonial rule and its impression on the people of the region.

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18. Quoted from Bombay Committee, *History of Freedom Movement*, in T. T. Sharma, *Op. Cit.*, p. 35.
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20. Dr. Purushothama B., *Op. Cit.*, p. 38.
21. Hobsbawm E. J., *Bandits* (1969), p. 17.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
23. Rossetti C. G., 'The Ideology of Banditry', Published in Man (N. S.), *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 17, No. 1, March 1982, p. 139.
24. Scholars like Terence Ranger and J. D. Hargreaves, working on the problems of colonialism and nationalism in East, Central and West African contexts have distinguished between "Primary resistance" and "Secondary resistance" The former is looked upon as "the hostile reaction of the unmodified tribal forms" while the latter is seen as "the muter protest of millenarian movements, welfare associations, independent churches, and trade unions; and finally the emergence of modern political parties." See Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj* (1978), p. 120.