

# AN INITIAL PEASANT PROTEST IN EARLY COLONIAL SOUTH KANARA (1810-11)

N. SHYAM BHAT,\*

In this paper an attempt is made to analyse one of the significant peasant protests that broke out in South Kanara district during 1810-11. The official records are not very copious in providing information regarding the nature, organisation, leadership, area of operation and other details concerning this protest. It should be understood in the light of peasant discontent and frustration on account of economic grievances. The crucial factor involved in this peasant disturbance was that of land revenue. The peasants complained of the high exaction of land revenue, and hated the introduction of salt and tobacco monopoly and the British judicial system. 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. 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>1</sup>

The peasant protest of 1810-11 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 years of the nineteenth century. Since private property in land<sup>2</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 land for cultivation to the undertenants through various systems of tenancy that prevailed in the region. The system of leasing and sub-leasing of land gave scope for the exploitation of the poor peasants by the native landlords. We have shown elsewhere<sup>3</sup> that Munro never felt himself free to deviate from the "Mysore System" in any considerable way and that the much accredited Ryotwari System did not help the ryots in any substantial way.

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>4</sup> of rough-and-ready

---

\* READER, DEPT OF HISTORY, GOA UNIVERSITY, SANTA CRUZ P.O GOA, 403 005

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>5</sup>

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 paltry 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>6</sup> was the general impoverishment of agriculture and the ryots. In 1810, Alexander Read, the Collector of Kanara remarked: "Viewing their (peasants) present state, I do not hesitate to advance that we are drawing more revenue from them than is consistent with good policy; and that whenever a permanent settlement is ordered to be made, it must be lighter than the present to answer the hopes of government."<sup>7</sup>

The ryots also complained about the introduction of new heads of revenue, They hated the introduction of salt and tobacco monopoly. The introduction of law courts or British judicial system, its cumbersome process, and the use of stamp paper were disliked by the people.<sup>8</sup> Another factor which antagonised the peasants was a general state of economic depression throughout the District during the period under study. There was a considerable fall in the market for their staple produce, rice, and also other agricultural products such as pepper, cardamon and coconut. All these articles were to be sold at a cheaper rate than the average fair price.<sup>9</sup> The low demand for these marketable items was due to the shifting of a large number of armed men and European residents from the region. There was a considerable fall in the circulation of specie due to the reduction of troops, and abolition of European and Native establishments.<sup>10</sup> Added to this, a large amount of the crop of the previous year had remained unsold, though the cultivation in 1809-10 had suffered due to drought.<sup>11</sup> The impoverishment of agriculture and the peasants was reported by Read in 1810 when he said: "I am sorry to observe I met with few signs of improvement, on the contrary all the places I halted at exhibited a more decayed state than they did some years ago".<sup>12</sup>

In 1811, again Read reported, "It is certain the agriculture of both Kanara and Soonda is not improving of late in that degree to be wished - a more rigorous exaction of rent would neither be comfortable to the usage hitherto observed, nor production of any solid advantage to Government... In the opinion of the people themselves, the bulk of the inhabitants are not so wealthy as they were some years ago, which they ascribe and I think very justly to a diminished trade, while they are subjected to heavy exactions."<sup>13</sup>

All these made the peasants to come together and launch a no tax campaign. All that the administrative records confirm is that the ryots joined together and announced their refusal to pay the *Kists* (Stated payments) to the government.<sup>14</sup> The defiance of the ryots had shown evidently that they had come to their tether's end. The records give us no details regarding their area of

operation or methods. We also have no means of knowing how violent or intransigent the peasants were. They evidently sought a remission in the revenue assessment, and hoped to impress their demand upon the government by an open act of defiance.

The ryots certainly did well enough to draw the attention of the government but to no avail. Alexander Read in his *jummabundy* reports admitted the fact of impoverishment of agriculture and the peasants. But it is characteristic of the colonial policy that when he attributed the causes for the revenue arrears in 1809, and later when he was asked to quell the peasant protest in 1810-11, he sidelined the live issue of overassessment and the introduction of salt and tobacco monopoly. On 13th May, 1809, he reported the following causes for the failure of the peasants to pay the governmental revenue.<sup>15</sup>

- a) The diminished power and influence of the Tahsildars.
- b) The refractory disposition of the ryots in evading payment of their rents under various pretences,
- c) Interruptions from summonses by the Court, Commissioners and *Tanadars*, and
- d) Difficulty of understanding and tediousness in applying the process contained in Regulation 1802 for the recovery of arrears.

These reasons given by Read are, no doubt, a good pointer to the inadequacy of British system. But they cannot cover up the fact that the revenue demand tended to remain high while the ability of the ryots to pay it was low.

Again in 1810-11, when Read had to put down the peasant unrest, he issued a proclamation saying that "The aims of the ryots at unjust remissions are known to the Board of Revenue and Government and will not be allowed and that I be authorised to conclude the current (1810-11) years settlement upon the following terms as nearly as possible."<sup>16</sup>

- a) That lands left entirely waste from death, desertion, disease, or other good and sufficient cause thoroughly proved, to be excused paying rent this year.
- b) That lands, one half of which may from the above causes be left uncultivated shall be taxed at half their rent only this year.
- c) Lands one fourth of which may be proved to be uncultivated the rent of which may be equal to *Bahadry Pagodas* 100 (Rupees 400) per annum shall be assessed at the remaining three fourths rent, but if the rent was more than *Bahadry Pagodas* 100, then no remission will be granted to them.
- d) All other waste which does not exceed one fourth of the estate shall pay the same rent as in fusly 1219 (A.D. 1809-10).
- e) Of the temporary remission granted last year, one half shall invariably be added to the rents of the ryots this year, unless prevented by some of the foregoing circumstances.
- f) Those who have had their personal property or grain upon their estates sold in confirmity with a decree of the Court shall be taxed according to the Collector's judgement upon a particular enquiry and inspection of the estate.

After slapping these rules on the ryots, Read observed; "These rules if rigorously enforced, will, I am persuaded, have a beneficial tendency in destroying the spirit of combination so prevalent among the Canara ryots, and render my subsequent settlements as well as those of my successor more certain and easy."<sup>17</sup>

Apart from a paltry and temporary remission in land revenue, the government did not adopt any permanent measures to help the peasants. However, the remission granted in 1810-11, gave some temporary relief to the distressed peasants. In the post-1810 period, the government never changed its revenue policy and the same system of high revenue collection continued. This ultimately resulted in the peasant uprising of 1830-31 which was much violent, well organised and more widespread than the one under study.

The peasant unrest of 1810-11 falls into the category of mass insurrection of peasants. Kathleen Gough says that mass insurrection of peasants were fought for the redress of specific grievances; these are basically secular in character, have no charismatic leader, may initially be reformative involving peaceful mass boycotts or demonstrations but may end up with fiercely fought revolts when reprisals are made against them.<sup>18</sup> D.N.Dhanagare also accepts this view.<sup>19</sup> This peasant protest may best be described, by taking the economic hardship of the peasants into consideration, as "tax rebellions" a phrase which Eric Stokes<sup>20</sup> makes use of to define the nature of the peasant violence of 1857 in India. Tax rebellions are the response of the peasants against the exorbitant share of land revenue demanded by the government.

#### Notes and reference :

1. Sunil Sen, "The Rise of the peasant", Presidential Address, Modern Indian History, *Indian History Congress proceedings*, 46th Session, (Amritsar, 1985), P. 2
2. 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 Sturrock, *Madras District Manuals, South Kanara*, Vol. I.(Government press, Madras, 1894), P. 118; S. Sundraraja Iyengar, *Land Tenures in the Madras presidency*, (Madras, 1916),P. 32.
3. N. Shyam Bhat, "The 'Munro System'; Land Revenue Administration in South Kanara(1799-1800)", paper presented at VII Session of Karnatak History Congress, Davanagere, 29-31 Jan., 1988.
4. 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. See John sturrok, op. cit., P. 215; P. Gururaja Bhatt, *Studies in Tuluva History and Culture*, (Manipal, 1975), P. 204.
5. T. Thomas to Madras Board of Revenue (hereafter *BOR*), 17-6-1823, *Proceedings of the Madras Board of Revenue* (heresafter *PMBR*), 26-6-1823, Vol. No. 952, P.5,102.
6. For a detailed study of the revenue administration and its consequences, see N. Shyam Bhat, "South Kanara 1799-1860 : A Study in Colonial Administration and Regional Response", unpublished Ph.D. Thesis Mangalore University, (November, 1987)
7. Alexander Read to *BOR*, 21 -4-1810, *PMBR*, 30-4-1810, Vol. 513, p.3350.

8. *Ibid*, pp. 3350-56.
9. *Ibid*, p. 3356.
10. *Ibid*, p. 3346, *PMBR*, 16-5-1811, Vol. No. 541, p.3827.
11. *PMBR*, 30-4-1810, Vol. No513, p.3347.
12. Read to *BOR*, 21-4-1810, op.cit., 3346.
13. Alexander Read to *BOR*, 21-4-1811, *PMBR*, 16-5-1811, Vol. No. 541, pp. 3824-26.
14. Alexander Read to *BOR*, 30-4-1811, *PMBR*, 11-5-1809, Vol. No. 487, pp. 2701-02; Alexander Read to *BOR*, *PMBR*, 10-1-1811, Vol. No. 533, pp. 258-59.
15. *PMBR*, 22-5-1809, Vol. No. 488, 3015.
16. *PMBR*, 10-1-1811, Vol. No. 533, pp. 257-75.
17. *Ibid*, p. 261.
18. Kathleen Gough, "Indian Peasant Uprisigs", in A.R. Desai (Ed.), *Peasant Struggles in India*", (Oxford University press, New Delhi, 1985), p. 94 and p. 108.
19. D.N. Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in India : 1920-1950*, (Oxford University press, New Delhi, 1983), pp. 213-14.
20. Eric Stokes quoted in C.A. Bayly (Ed.) *The Peasant Armed : The Indian Revolt of 1857*, (Oxford, 1986), p. 213.