

AGRARIAN SYSTEM IN SOUTH KANARA (1779-1831)

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The paper makes an attempt to analyse the agrarian system in early colonial South Kanara. It covers the first three decades of the English East India Company's administration in the region. In this context, South Kanara denotes the Southern Division of the Province of Kanara and Soonda of the Madras Presidency. The Southern Division of Kanara consisted of Barkur, Bekal (Kasaragod), Buntwal and Mangalore Taluks.

Burton stein opines that agrarian system is a concept which permits him to treat the relationship between people, groups of people, and the land as a systematic unity, a whole.¹ So, agrarian system, to Stein, is a broader concept, which studies, the relationship between various groups of people in the society in relation to land. People, various groups of people, and land are the various components of the same agrarian system. Daniel Thorner, using the term "agrarian structure" states "the agrarian structure is after all, not an external framework within which various classes function, but rather it is the sum total of ways in which each group operates in relation to other groups"².

In South Kanara, the British annexation of the region had destroyed certain old elements political, economic and social which figured in the agrarian system of the pre-annexation period. For instance, the old political elites, like the *Raja* of Nileshwar, Kumbla and Vittal were put down by the British in their pacification campaign, and were reduced to the position of zamindars. There was considerable decline in their political, economic and social position. Village affairs were controlled by

persons who held the title of a headmen by local custom.³ Earlier these village headmen used to play a crucial role in the field of revenue collection, and used to act as arbitrators in settling the village disputes. Such local headmen and their role in the society became less important with the introduction of the British revenue administration and appointment of village officials. Further, the introduction of the British judicial system minimised their importance as settlers of disputes.

In the field of land revenue administration, there was a remarkable change with the introduction of the 'Ryotwari' system of Sir Thomas Munro in 1799-1800. The institution of private property popularly known as *mulawarg* in the region was recognised by the British and each ryota was given a *patta*. But all the ryots of South Kanara were not ryots in the real sense of the term. They included zamindars, rich peasants, poor peasants and landless labourers. Since the class of ryots included ryots of the stature of zamindars, they used to lease out their land for cultivation. The system of letting out land for cultivation became crucial in forming the agrarian system and relations of the people.

Another important change introduced by the British was the collection of revenue only in cash and not in kind. Besides these changes, what was more significant and affected the agrarian system and relations was the high exaction of revenue from land and also from other sources. It led to land revenue arrears, rise of moneylenders, confiscation of property by the Government, transfer of property from the hands of the poor to the rich, and in brief the impoverishment of agriculture and the peasantry.

In theory, the share of the Government was 30% of the gross produce, but in practice it went upto 50% of it or sometimes even more than that. The factors of over assessment and inequality in assessment were glaring.⁴

These shortcomings were noted repeatedly by different Collectors. But none of them took any effective measure to combat these evils of the revenue system. Generally the result was that a large number of peasants fell in arrears to the Government. The lands of such peasants were publicly auctioned by the Government, and the amount of revenue due was realised. This process of auctioning land led to the creation of a new set of *wargadars*, who paid a relatively higher amount of revenue to the Government. This was one of the ways by which large scale transfer of property ownership took place.

Another form of transfer of land was from the hands of the ryots to those of the merchant moneylenders. The new land lords, moneylenders and administrative officials, who had close links with the British bureaucracy, saw to it that the British revenue and judicial administration favoured them in every possible way. The newly emerged groups like landed Brahmins, Bunts and merchants established themselves as a complex layer of adept and influential manipulators between the Company, that is, the administration and the peasantry.⁵ In 1826, A.F. Hudleston, the sub-collector of Kanara, reported about such fraudulent contrivances of the *magne Shanbagues* in South Kanara, who exploited the ignorance of the peasants by substituting sale deeds for mortgage lands, obtained their signatures and cheated them.⁶ More disastrous than the manipulations made by these native revenue officials in the revenue accounts was the unholy alliance between these officials and the local merchant moneylenders. It is stated that even as early as 1826, during the jumabundy, the village revenue official was followed by the merchant moneylender and when the former insisted the impoverished ryots to pay their *kists*, the latter suggested the ryots to make use of the loan which he was ready to offer.⁷ Some of the merchant moneylenders were also revenue officials. Some of them were only merchants like the Konkanis of Buntwal. Sometimes, the rich *mulawargadars* or *zamindars* themselves played the role of a moneylender.

When the ryots fell in arrears to the Government, they mortgaged their land to the moneylenders and borrowed loans. It was known as *bogiadhi adaru* or *bogiadhi* or living mortgage or *aruwar*. The rate of interest that the moneylenders charged varied from 6% to 12% per year.⁸ Another kind of mortgaging was prevalent in the region. It was the system of fore-stalling the future crop, against the sum borrowed even before the seed from which it was to spring was put on the ground. It was called *torradhoo* or *toradooroo* or dead mortgage, and was prevalent to a ruinous extent. Its result was that the unfortunate peasant was pressed down by the rich grain merchant, and derived no advantage from any rise in the price of his produce, which went to the mortgagee (the merchant or the zamindar), who allowed only such a share to the peasant which enabled him to prevent his family from starving.⁹ When once the ryots came under the octopus - like grip of the native moneylenders, they could never free themselves from them, till they sold their land to the moneylenders. From the 1830's onwards, this kind of sale or transfer of property ownership became common in South Kanara, which ensured that the property of the poorer peasants passed into the hands of the richer peasants or zamindars and moneylenders.

The agrarian relationship that existed between the *mulawargadars* and their tenants, was also not conducive to the development of agriculture and the economy. Among the various systems of sub-tenures, the most common was that of *chalageni* in which the revenue share of the *mulawargadar* was the highest, and the tenure of the *chalagenidar* was not safe. The *mulawargadar* had the right to enhance his share and the *chalagenidar's* position was much weaker than that of a *mulagenidar*. In *vaidegeni* was weak and the *mulawargadar* to enhance his share, the system of letting out land for cultivation, where there was no scope for the *mulawargadar* to enhance his share, the system was preferred least by the rich *mulawargadars* or zamindars, particularly during the post-1814 period. The

share of the *mulagenidar* was about 50% of the gross produce and that of the *chalagenidar* ranged from 40% to 50% of the gross produce.¹⁰ These insecure systems of leasing out land for cultivation exploded the myth of 'peasant proprietorship' (implied in the ryotwari system) as a viable alternative to the zamindari settlement.¹¹

Besides these popular systems of leasing out land for cultivation, there prevailed the systems of *walawargadar* and *kudutaledar*. *Walawargadar* meant a subordinate land owner who bought his land from the *wargadar*, for which there was no separate *patta* and paid his revenue to the *wargadar*. If the land bought by the *walawargadar* was separately registered, then his position was more safe. In both *walawargadar* and *kudutaledar* systems of land ownership, there was enough scope for misunderstanding and friction between the *mulawargadar* and the *walawargadar*, and also between the *mulawargadar*, and the *kudutaledar*. In the same way if the land bought by the *kudutaledar* from the *mulawargadar* was registered in the village registers, then the former's position was safe. If it was unregistered, the *kudutaledar*'s land also would be occupied by the Government, if there was any due on the land owned by the *mulawargadar*, from whom he bought his land, for the *patta* for the sold land and the unsold land was one and the same and possessed by the *mulawargadar* in his name. Further in this system on the sale of a portion of the *warg* by a *wargadar* to the *Kudutaledar*, a sum was also fixed in the sale deed as the proportionate revenue of the portion sold. In such a case, the *kudutaledar* used to pay his share of the revenue direct to Government, and not through the *wargadar*. It is not known whether this practice was prevalent in the system of *walawargadar*.¹² So the difference between the two systems, if there was any, remains unidentified.

Apart from the *malawagadars* and various types of tenure holders there was the class of agricultural labourers which

consisted of the *kuliyalugalu* and *muladalugalu*. We do not get much reference to their working condition or standard of living in the administrative records of the period. Nevertheless, the available documents reveal that their life was very hard and miserable as in most other parts of British India.

The system of paying the Government revenue in cash disturbed the subsistence ethic of the peasants. The revenue remission granted by the Government every year was very meagre and it ever reached the under-tenants at all. Worse still, the remissions granted in a particular year was collected in the subsequent years.

The land revenue administration, the resultant agrarian system and agrarian relations, on the whole, was not conducive for the socio-economic development of the region. It resulted in the impoverishment of agriculture and also the ryots. The absence of the systems of Government loan and irrigation made their plight worse. The peasants, failing to bear the brunt of the new administrative and revenue systems, broke out in primary resistance movements in 1810-11 and again in 1830-31. Overassessment resulted in land revenue arrears which in turn led to confiscation and auctioning of land and also transfer of land ownership. The rich ryots grew as zamindars. A new class of zamindars and merchant moneylenders emerged in the region.

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