



ASPECTS OF SOCIAL CONDITION OF DALITS DURING MEDIEVAL KARNATAKA

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Abstract: History of Dalit's is not seriously discussed at least in the context of Karnataka. Most of the articles appeared on Dalit's are either connected or contemporary problems or related to more ideological debates since last three decades in Karnataka. This article, however intends to discuss some of the aspects of Dalits in the history of medieval Karnataka, especially issues related to caste hierarchy, habitation, slavery and occupation.

Index Terms – Caste hierarchy, habitation, slavery, and occupation.

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Caste hierarchy

Everywhere in India there is a definite scheme of social precedence amongst the castes, with the Brahmin at the head of heirarchy¹. Spontaneous revolts and protest as well as organized struggle by Ati shudra or Dalits against socio-economic exploitation, discrimination and subjugation is not a recent phenomenon. Throughout the history of the caste system such instances of protests though not always widespread can be found. Even while practicing the rituals and worshipping the deities of upper caste Hindus, Dalits do not accept their present status as a results of their deeds in the previous birth².

The caste system lay at basis the social organization of society during medieval period. Since ancient times society had been divided into four varnas or social estates. Each varna in turn was divided into various different jatis, castes. Each of the there groups which differed

from the other whether by virtue of its occupation, customs or religious faith, formed a special caste, was believed to possess a certain degree of purity and impurity and stood in complex hierarchical relationship with the other castes.

Brahmanical community reestablished its total control over the both the state and civil society. The caste system became further rigidified and spread over into tribal society. The scientific discoveries undertaken by Shudra force were rapidly changing the society in all spheres. Such science discoveries were either attacked or marginalized. The Dalits were condemned as Mlechcha, Rakshasa, Chandala and so on. More egregiously, their productive work was defined as “unclean pollution”, philosophical Brahmanism destroyed the very foundation of production³. And during the 12th century Brahmanism also transformed into agrahara land owning Brahmanism. Brahmanism also established its grip over new constructed temples. Entry to chandala and shudras was banned by the Brahmanical priest craft, Kalyan revolution led by Basaveshwara in the 12th century AD in Karnataka, against what he considered as the wicked traits of upper class. It was of course a second trenchant attack after Buddha and Mahaveera.

Basaveshwara, naturally he ridiculed discrimination based on caste and untouchability. The man objectives his movement was to established a right relation between man and man and god and religion, such that universal values of love, compassion and brotherhood become the fundamentals of life. His close untouchable followers like Samagara Haralaya, Dhor Kakkayya, Madar Channayya had unique role and place in this movement⁴. Then, Purandaradas and Kanakadas were also not sufficient to shake the formidable foundations of caste based society. Equality before god did not seem to translate itself into social equality of all men. The institution of caste with all its social and economic implications was accepted almost universally, and the upholding of the social order organized and its basis was held to be primary duty of ruler⁵.

Habitation

Traditional classification of society into four castes got itself further divided into number of groups. They were Brahmins, the Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra and Chandala and Matangas. The Chandalas were in the lowest caste. They were untouchables and they lived on the outskirts of the village away from the caste Hindu. The Madigas were yet another group of untouchable. In this context, the society was divided into number of caste and sub castes⁶.

Caste differences were rigid. Besides, some people in lower castes were Devadasis, who dance in the temples and functioned as temple prostitutes, musicians, dancing girls. The position of their people in society was never regarded as respectable. Most of them were treated with contempt as their occupation was considered as unclean. The Bhakti movement had not opened the eyes of the people to abuses which the caste system had brought in its wake⁷. The Sudra castes were a main body comprising several sub-castes both higher and lower. Agriculture was their main occupation. Several classes of people following diverse, the Gollas and the Idaiyans who were shepherd by profession, they were included in the Shudra caste. The Kurubas, washer man, the barber as Shudras⁸.

Madigas are the lowest caste in the society. Their quarters outside of main village, known as Madiga-keri⁹ (Madiga Quarters). Some inscriptions refer to Holegeri.¹⁰ They are not allowed to use the common village well, and have their own barbers and washer man. Madigas may not approach Brahmans within a distance of about twenty paces. Any Brahman who has been touched inadvertently or purposely by a Madiga must purify himself by bathing, and washing all his cloths renewing a sacred thread. Their quarters are separate from those allotted to the Holeyas, and are generally further removed from the main village. Again during celebration of the festival of the village goddess Maramma, the share of the sacrifice animal which the Madiga gets is the last, while that of the Holeyas is the last but one¹¹.

During Vijayanagara period, Chandals formed a caste by themselves, and they lived hamlets exclusively set apart for habitation, away from the abodes of the men of superior caste¹². Both in towns and villages, the castes tended to live in separate quarters of their own and follow their own peculiar customs and habits. The outcastes who tilled the land and hard work lived in hamlets of a distance from the village proper. But Basaveshwara rejected separatism, especially agrahara and holegeri etc. He constructed a very militant veerashaiva discourse and revolted against Brahmanism, even though he himself was born in a Brahmin family. Basava's movement attempts to nail Brahmanism by deconstructing in a systematic manner¹³.

The social distance as used in the science of social psychology is nothing but a kind of measurement of relationship between the two individuals or between the upper caste and untouchables. In this context, they were constructed separate quarters. The science of interpersonal relationships which deals with personality and the relationship on the one hand

and that between relationship and the social environment on the other, has recently assumed a great importance in the field of social psychology¹⁴.

Slavery

There is no doubt that at least since Vedic times slavery existed in India. The slaves were divided into two main categories. Slaves who worked in the fields and were permanently attached to a certain estate. And household slaves. There were again subdivided into slaves who were the personal attendants of their masters and could enter even the inner quarters of the house. While the field slaves commonly belonged to the untouchables. In ancient times until the arrival of the British and often much later most domestic work was performed by slaves, at least in the upper classes of Indian society. After the abolition of slavery, the old socio-economic setup was not being changed at once, it continued in a modified form. Many domestic servants earned their living by attaching themselves to some big families and working for them. These conditions have now disappeared and only traces of the old system have survived in the more far off village communities which remained unscathed from the urbanizing influence of cities and towns. In the time of medieval Karnataka slavery was reappeared¹⁵.

The society was being built anew to suit the changing needs of the during medieval age. But there was no let up in the observance of prescribed duties by the Brahmans of the high class. Untouchability was in practice. We come across a hero stone commemorating oneself on military service helped men to rise in social hierarchy by accruing wealth and administrative positions¹⁶. The Holeyas were mostly concerned with servile jobs for the higher caste. A few inscriptions often refer for them as Holeyalu¹⁷. Further the epigraphical sources belonging to the period between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries often inform us that these Holeyas were purchased along with land in which they were attached. This practice was in vogue till the end of eighteenth century as known from the Kadatas on the eve of the establishment British rule in coastal Karnataka, the Holeyalu used to get hane a rice from their master¹⁸, whenever they were employed in the field.

In earlier, under Vijayanagara the institution of slavery continued. The existence of slavery during the period is testified to by foreign travelers, like Abdul Razzak, Nicolo dei conti and Barbosa. An inscription of 1470 AD relating to the agrahara of

Kuppattur speaks of basavaga (bond-servant) while another refers to female slaves, and that the Holeyas were dependents at the feet of the Vira banajigas¹⁹.

What that agriculture sect was in the rural areas, the slave appears to have been in the urban areas. While the farmer was attached to the soil, the latter was attached to the person of his master. In Bidar there was a trade in the 'Black people'. Portugueses that came to the empire followed the customs of the country and employed slaves. Linchoten noted that such slaves were sold in the market like beasts while Pietro della vella was surprised to see that the greater part of the Goa at were slaves²⁰. Slaves were obtained from various sources. Some families sold themselves as hereditary slaves.

They were liable to change hands as chattels. Trade in slaves appears to have increased during time of famine. Barbosa says that when the people on the Coromandel Coast actually starving and many died of hunger. The people sold their children for four or five panams each, and that during that reasons Malabarics brought them great store of rice and coconuts and took away shiploads of slaves. The famine that regard in south India in 1630Ad was so reverse that parents brought their children for the sea for sale of five panamas worth's of rice. They were transported from that region to other parts of India and the East Indies and sold again to good advantage²¹. Mention may also be made of slave labour in this context, which besides hired labour, was also probably made use of for purposes of agriculture these are good seasons to believe that slavery did exist during this period. Inscriptions refer to some believed on the slaves (tottu). In fact, a record of 1430 AD from the kolar show that slaves, like bullocks and horses, were sold in the weekly fairs (sante). Whether such a practice existed during this period also, some records seem to refer to 'Bond servant' (besavakkalu) who were probably attached to the land. In fact we learnt from a record dated along with the men servant and women servants.

If may be noticed, in passing slavery was apparently not a very hard bondage. It has stated that the slave of the middle ages, whom he was connected with agriculture, was a territorial slave to the land. These slaves were not ordinary molested or moved, whenever might be the nominal owner, they were safe in their significance, and continued until the ground their ancestors had tilled before them²². Another inscription dated 1382 AD refer for female slaves. Women declared inconstant by the samayacharges or religious leaders were liable to sold in public. Wilks says that the rulers system varied with the caste of the

accused. Slaves received presents in the form of cloth and money in certain occasion such as the celebration of festivals marriage etc. Slave's social condition very critical²³.

Slavery as an old institution in Mysore was precisely in the some form as it existed on the west coast, namely Malabar, Cochin, Travancore and south canara. Slavery chiefly however in the agrarian form, existed from the time immemorial, and to a great extent in Malnad. They are rapidly approximating to the state of the better class of agriculture labourer. The Ikkeri princes possessed a great many slaves, acquired by conquest or otherwise, some of whom were employed in the garden at Nagar. And other in keeping in repairs the forts Lakkavalli, Kavaledurga etc²⁴. The labour servants of the farmers are called Jitagara or hired men. They eat once a day in their master's house; a good worker gets also forty panams a year²⁵.

Occupation

Indian Society has imposed an all leather workers the duty to deal with dead cattle. Some sections – and there are the lowest skin and remove the carcasses from the village. Even among these sections there are grades: Some touch no bodies but these of the cloven – footed animals, other draw the line at cattle and leave sheep and goats to their inferiors. Usually to hide becomes the property of the skinner and he may also cut of a portion of the skinner and he may also cut of a portion of the animals flash if in his section he is not forbidden to eat cassion. Indeed, when the market for skins is brisk, or in revenge for a slight or injustice, mortality among the cattle is apt to rise materially and the suspicion is frequently voiced that this is due to poisoning. In many villages in Karnataka leather workers cannot keep exclusively to seek employment as field labourers. Usually they work only as occasional labourers, at the bidding of the farmers and glad when they can get any kind of employment. They have to live in hamlets of their own separated from the village of the caste Hindus, and are treated as untouchables²⁶.

The Holeyas are chiefly employed as labourer in connection with agriculture and manufacture with hand-looms various kinds of coarse or home span cloth which are work extensively by the poorer classes²⁷. Holeyas constituted the bulk of agricultural labourer in south India. They were debarred by their birth from entering into the civil and military service of the state they took to highway robbery. An enterprising leader would gather around him a band of allied spirits and organize expeditions of robbery and decoity, until the

government moved its lethargic machinery to put him and his followers down²⁸. Therefore, in Holeyas or the pariahs become one of the principal criminal tribe of medieval age. Edgar Thurston and Rangachari writes about banded labourer. Most of the purely malnad and hilly taluks, each vargdar or propriets of landed estates own a set of servants styled huttalu and mannalu. The former is the hereditary servitor of the family born in servitude and performing agricultural work for land-holder from father to son. The mannalu is a self attached to the soil and changes hands with it²⁹.

The bonded labourer jitada aalu had only a superficial similarity with the bonded tenant. The tenant had privilege of keeping a portion of what he produced by the virtue of his being attached to land. The jitada aalu had no such land to which he was attached to the landlord and thus his only claim could be that he was the servant his master to whom belonged to all fruits of his toil and it was exclusively at his mercy that he could live³⁰. From Dakshin kannada we again have information from Francis Buchanan of the existence of bonded labourers called Mulada Holeyas³¹. Madigas are worker in leather. They have a primitive way of tanning and preparing it. They first apply chunam to the hides of cows and buffaloes. And keep them for some days. The leather is used for making leather buckets, shoes and other simple things. Then employed as village watchmen. They are known as talaris. They are also known as begaris, as they are bound to serve without remuneration they are employed as scavengers in large towns and keep them clean. Thses variations in calling do not affect their social status.

Some Madigas have taken to agriculture. They were cultivated land their master and get wages, or hired servants under raiyats on annual contracts. The conditions of the contract very differences localities, but the most common terms for the master to feed the servant twice a day. Holeyas and Madigas generally labourers. They were get a daily wages. One kolaga of the paddy for males, four kolagas of paddy for females and one meal of cooked food. In addition to their duties in the field, they are village watchmen and general messengers chalavadi who is generally a Holya, is a servant of right hand caste or caste section of the community³².

Body guards and servants like lenka velevali and garuda were known to have died with their master. The last named was popular in the Hoysala court. Some of them Dalits. For e.g., the object of inscription is to commorate the death on the occasim of cattle-raid, of a local hero

named Dommara-Kadava of the Dombar or Gipries³³. Madigara Hampa and Holeyara Hulla were also joined the military service in Kumararama period³⁴.

Conclusion

In the light of the above discussions, researchers are attempting to focuss the hegemony of power of the dominant casters in medieval Karnataka. The supporting data in order to understand the relationship between suppressed communities and dominant is much needed in the regard. In spite of there limitations, I could gather some reflections on the history of Dalits in medieval Karnataka.

Notes:

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3. Ibid, p. 120.
4. Ibid, p. 122.
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9. Iyer L.K.A, The Mysore Tribes and Castes, Vo.4, Mittal Publication, Delhi, 1988, p. 168.
10. Kannada University Epigraphical Series -7, Raichur District, Prasaranga, Kannada University, Hampi, p. 100; EC. VII. P.54; Kannada University, Epigraphical Series – 2, 1557 AD, p. 151.
11. The Mysore Tribes and Castes, Ibid, p. 162.
12. Venkata Ramanayya N, Ibid, p. 352.
13. Ghanshyam Shah (ed), Ibid, p. 122.
14. Singh S.S and Sundaram S, Emerging Harijan Elite, Publishing House, New Delhi, 1987, p. 82.

15. Stephen Fuchs, *At the Bottom of Indian Society*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, 1981, p. 155.
16. Suryanath U Kamath, *A concise History of Karnataka*, Jupiter Books, Bangalore, 2001, p. 179.
17. Vasanth Madhava K.G., *Western Karnataka*, Navranga, New Delhi, 1991, p. 54-55.
18. *Ibid*, P. 57; holeyalu means forced labour and have is an area about particular land.
19. Saraswathi Nanaiah, *The Position of Women during Vijayanagara Period*, Saraswathi Publication. New Delhi, 1992, p. 157.
20. Mahalingam T.V., *Administration and Social Life under Vijayanagara*, University of Madras, Madras, 1975, p. 10-11.
21. *Ibid*, p. 12, Panam is a gold coin at time.
22. Gururajachar S., *Some Aspects of Economic and Social life in Karnataka*, Prasaranga, University of Mysore, Mysore, 1974, p. 50.
23. *Ibid*, P.51.
24. *The Mysore Tribes and Castes*, *Ibid*, Vol. 3, p. 325-326.
25. Francies Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras, Through the Countries of Mysore, Malabar and Canara*, Vol.II, Asian Educational Service, London, p. 108.
26. Stephen Fuchs, *At the Bottom of Indian Society*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, 1981, P.196.
27. Iyer L.K.A., *Ibid*, p. 349.
28. Venkata Ramanayya, *Ibid*, p. 361.
29. Saki, *Making History*, Vol.I, Vimukti Prakashan, Bangalore, 1998, p. 174.
30. *Ibid*, p. 175.
31. *Ibid*, p. 175.
32. Iyer L.K.A., *Ibid*, p. 350.
33. Saki, *Making History*, Vol.I, Vimukti Prakashan, Bangalore, 1998, p. 174.
34. *EI. VI*, P. 161, The record is not dated. But as we have for Dhruva the dated of AD 778-783, It may be placed roughly about AD 780.
35. Chidanandamurthy, *Madhyakaleena Kannada Sahitryadalli Asprishyateya Parikalpane*, Prasaranga, Karnataka Vishvavidyalaya, Dharwad, 1985, p. 43.