



Land Revenue Administration Of Colonial Rule In Dakshina Kannada

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Dakshina Kannada or the erstwhile South Kanara is an administrative name of a coastal region of Karnataka. The district includes a distinct culture-region of Tulu Nadu¹ and owing to its geography history, linguistic and religious mosaic and ethnographical richness; it can be a legitimate and intelligible unit of study. It is a distinct cultural zone.

Colonialism made domination and hegemony after the annexation of the region. The year 1799 is a land mark in the history of Kanara in the sense that the province came under the rule of the British with the overthrow Sultanate rule. Afterwards it became a part of the Madras Presidency. The occupation of the Kanara (both North and South) gave the British an uninterrupted tract of territory from the eastern coast to western coast. The ports of the Canara coast such as Mangalore, Barkuru, Basruru, Honnavara, Bhatkala, etc were not only important for the British from the commercial point of view but strategically also helped them to maintain control on the coastal districts and regulate the activities of the French.

The British contacts with Kanara before the occupation in 1799 were in the beginning commercial in nature. At the later stages, with the emergence the Sultans of Mysore, the contacts became more of military and strategic in character as the possession of the coastal ports became an absolute necessity for the British.

The Englishmen appeared for the first time at Mangalore in 1737 in connection with a treaty with the Bidanur . This treaty provided for a few commercial advantages including a monopoly of the pepper and cardamom trade in some parts of northern Kerala, which was under Bidanur. Another agreement concluded in 1751 with Bidanur, granted the Company permission for building factory of Honore (Honnavar) and all commercial privileges in Kolattunad (Kerala).

¹ Regions consist of modern Dakshina Kannada and Udupi Districts of Karnataka and Kasaragod District of Kerala State.

Revenue administration

The regions of Kanara (South Kanara and North Kanara) remained together up to 1862, when North Kanara was separated by Colonial rule and added to the Bombay Presidency. South Kanara included the district of Kasaragod of Kerala state, is remained under the rule of Madras presidency. The early colonial rule from 1799 to 1862 laid the basic foundation of the revenue, police and judicial administrations, and the major features of the system continued more or less in the same way till the independence.

Revenue formed an important source of income of any colonial administration. Hence, the administration focused more on streamlining the revenue system once its hold on the region was tightened. The sources of revenue in Kanara were land, and other than land, were salt and tobacco monopoly, sea and land customs, village taxes, abkari, small forms and licences, temples and Mathas. They fetched enough income for the state to meet the expenditure of the administration.

The land revenue formed the major sources of income for the government. Since private property in land was recognised in South Kanara by the state, the Company government introduced ryotwari system of land administration in South Kanara. The Company showed more interest in increasing the revenue. In the absence of a regular system of surveying the land, the land was over assessed, which affected the peasants and led to the impoverishment of agriculture. The ryots failed to pay the share of the state and fell in revenue arrears. Therefore, the peasants demanded remissions and at critical economic situation they rose against the state. The middleman and moneylenders by their activities further created problems for the cultivators. The demand of revenue payment in cash by the government further worsened the condition of the agriculturalists. When the peasants failed to pay the tax, the revenue officials confiscated the land and auctioned it publicly to realise the amount. Thus, the colonial rule brought about a great change in revenue administration and though it streamlined the collection of revenue it failed to ameliorate the conditions of the cultivators.

The major item of expenditure was on revenue administration only. The state had to maintain a vast establishment to maintain the system of collection and distribution of revenue. The police and judicial machineries also formed bigger items of expenditure. The development projects such as construction of roads, bridges, tanks and canals received less attention unless they became strategically necessary. Even education sector was neglected in the early phase of colonialism.

Nature of land tenures.

Different types of land tenures or land holdings prevailed in South Kanara in the pre-colonial period and the same continued during the British rule.

Private property and hereditary proprietary right over the soil was the characteristic feature of land ownership in South Kanara. Thomas Munro, the first collector of South Kanara opined that the lands in South Kanara constituted a sort of private property more ancient and probably more perfect than that of England. 'Mulwarga' and 'Mulawargadar' of South Kanara meant private property and its owner respectively. Warga means the registered holding and Wargadar means the registered holder. There was Geni of Sirkar – geni (government rent). The tenants or genidars, who cultivated Warga, were put in occupation of the land by the government. Apart from this, there were lands owned and managed by

religious institutions like the temples and mathas. The managers of these lands paid revenue to the government. The different tenures of land control were Mulgeni, Chalageni (chal means move or not permanent) and Vaidegeni (Vaide means period). Mulgeni and Chalageni were predominantly prevalent in the region. The holding of the Mulagenigar was the most secured one. At long as the holder paid specified rent to the landlord and his successors, he could enjoy the possession and his heirs also. Mulagenigar was a hereditary cultivator, a tenant holding a perpetual lease and this holding was also known as Kayamgeni (or permanent lease) and nigadigeni (fixed lease). The landlord or mulgar never had the right to enhance the rent of this mulagenigar. The mulagenigar, however did not have the right to sell his lands. Of course, he could mortgage, lease and pass on the lands and in default of children, could adopt and pass the lands to his adopted son. The mulagenigar thus enjoyed a number of right and privileges as a tenant. In case he wanted to give up the land, he could return the same to the landlord (mulawargadara).

Chalagenigars were temporary tenets and the tenancy was allowed to descend from father to son at the original rent agreed upon. However the landlord retained the right to raise the rent or expel the tenant. If the tenant had been holding the land for more than one or two generations, the tenure would be more secure. If the tenant had effected substantial improvements and occupied land for a long period, his status would be raised to that of mulagenies; however, the land lord would raise his rent substantially. The Chalagenigar suffered from many disadvantages, which made his position weak; however, he was safer than the tenant - at- will, who could be removed at will by the landlord. Another variety of tenure was called Vaidegeni. In this system, the tenant held lands for a specified number of years or period of time.

One more form of tenancy was known as Walawargadar and Kudutaledar. Sometimes a mulawargadar used to sell a portion of his land, without creating a fresh patta in the name of the purchaser and the patta for the whole land remained in the name of the Wargadar only. Kudutaledar was another kind of holding; here Wargadar sold a portion of a warg, fixing the revenue of the sold warg in the sale deed and the holder himself paid the revenue to the government and not through the Wargadar. The purchaser was called Kudutaledar. These two tenures however, were not as popular as the mulageni and chalageni.

Land Revenue system:

The basic foundation of modern land revenue system and administration was laid by the first collector of the province of Kanara and Sonda, Thomas Munro. He introduced the 'Ryotwari' system of land revenue administration. Munro accepted the existing institutions of land system as he found them, without any alteration. Munro found the system of private property very deep rooted in South Kanara and he decided to recognise the same. To him lands in South Kanara constituted a sort of private property, more ancient and probably more perfect than that of England. In fact private property manifested itself in the form of Mulawarg in the region. As we have seen, the mulawargadar of Kanara enjoyed hereditary and transferable property in the soil. Instead of introducing a new system, Munro sought to restore and strengthen the existing system. The factors that led Munro to go for 'Ryotwari system were many', he was not interested in disturbing the existing system; as South Kanara came under

colonial rule, Munro might have thought of winning the good will of the people of the region to legitimise the British rule; the prevalent Utilitarian ideas also must have influenced his decision; more than that he did not find a group of landlords with absolute ownership rights or an allodial gentry as it existed in Bengal, in the Kanara region. Therefore, he did not opt for Zamindari system or permanent settlement and went for direct agreement with the ryots or peasants under 'Ryotwari' settlement which suited more to the local conditions.

As Munro considered the cultivator or rayat (ryot) as the landlord, he decided to have the settlement with the actual landowners, the holders for the most part of small estates or wargs; ryots paid the taxes or assessment direct to the government. In South Kanara, the settlement was made in many cases not with the actual cultivator but with the proprietor of land (mulawargadar). He, in turn, used to let out a portion of his land to a tenant or tenants on the basis of mulageni or chalageni or vaidegeni tenures, from whom he received rent. The assessment was based on the bijawan system of land measurement. Munro's revenue administration suffered from a few defects. He introduced the collection of revenue only in cash; as a result ryots were forced to approach the merchant moneylenders for cash and the moneylenders thoroughly harassed them.

The system introduced by Munro continued with some minor changes after his departure. Though some reforms were effected here and there, the problem of over assessment, inequality in assessment and revenue arrears continued for some more time. Several changes were made in 1819-20. There was revision in revenue assessment in 1834-35 and it failed to achieve its objective of providing relief to the assesseees. A proper survey of land and revenue settlement could not be done for a long time. Though in theory, the share of the government was 30% of the gross produce, in practice, it went up to 50% or sometimes even more. Many a time ryots fell in arrears due to various reasons; therefore, they mortgaged their land to the moneylenders and borrowed loans. It was known as *bogiadhi adavu* or living mortgage. The rate of interest that the moneylenders charged varied from 6% to 12% per year.

Another kind of mortgaging was the system of forestalling the future crop, against the sum borrowed; it was called *torradhoo* or dead mortgage. The hold of the moneylenders was such that ryots, who fell in to their trap could never free themselves and many a time they lost their lands. The existing relationship between the mulavargadars and their tenants was not beneficial for the progress of agriculture and economy of the region. The tenures created a sense of insecurity among the tenants and the concept of "peasant proprietorship" lost its meaning.

The dissatisfaction among the ryots found its expression in the form of resistance movements of 1809-11 or Koot Rebellions of 1830-31 or the Rebellion of Kalyanaswamy in 1837. These rebellions took place against the exploitative revenue policy of the government. While the condition of the tenant ryots was bad, that of agricultural became even worse.

For the purpose of assessment, in the early nineteenth century different fields were classified into four different categories, called (1) Bailu (low-lying land of good quality with an abundant water supply) (2) Majalu (land capable of producing two crops of paddy in a year) (3) Bettu (land capable of producing one crop annually) and (4) Bagayat (land specially suitable for arecanut and coconut cultivation).

In 1889, the revenue survey work was initiated and was completed in 1896. Further, supplementary surveys were undertaken up to 1903. As a result of these surveys, some general principles were formulated for purposes of land revenue and settlement, and on the basis of those principles the first settlement was made. Before the first settlement, the land revenue demand of South Kanara stood at Rs. 14, 19,586. After the First Settlement, the demand rose to Rs. 23, 41,260. Of this total revenue demand, nearly 80 per cent was paid by the wet lands. After settling the general policy of revenue demand, special tenures like *Mulgeni* leases were taken up. The area under *Mulgeni* tenants turned out to be less than 10 per cent of the whole occupied area. In many cases, the rent was higher than the *Chalgeni* leases on similar lands. The total land revenue demand from 1892-93 was slightly under 13 lakhs of rupees derived wholly from the ryotwari lands, there being no *zamindari* or *inam* lands in the district.

In 1934-35 re-settlement was ordered. The general policy adopted by the government for the re-settlement was mainly confined to the rise in the prices of the standard crops since the original settlement. There was no general reclassification of the soils as the system of soil classification adopted in the original settlement was continued. Revenue was enhanced by 12.5 percent in the case of wet lands and no enhancement was made over the original settlement in the case of dry lands. In the post-independence India, several land reforms were introduced in various states. South Kanara was merged in the Mysore State, which came into existence in 1956. The Mysore (Karnataka) government introduced a number of reforms to streamline the revenue administration and also to protect the interests of the tenants. Accordingly the Mysore Land Reforms Act, 1961, as amended in 1965, had been brought in to force throughout the state in 1965. It was implemented in South Kanara also.

The article meticulously details how the Colonial rule transition of Dakshina Kannada and after fundamentally reshaped its governance, particularly its revenue administration. In sum, the colonial administration successfully streamlined the collection of revenue through the Ryotwari system, making it a major source of income. However, it did so at the steep cost of agricultural prosperity and completely neglected regional welfare. The legacy of over-assessment, debt bondage, and tenant insecurity laid the foundation for the region's economic distress in independent India were compelled to address.

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