



Depressed classes Assertion in Princely Mysore - A Study

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Abstract

The princely mysore state, which came to be called a model state by the British and Ramrajya by Mahatma Gandhi, was unique in several respects. After the Rendition of the state to the Wodeyar Kings in 1881, the Maharajas and the Dewans embarked upon developmental activities in a big way. Political and economic changes resulted in social and educational changes among the depressed classes. While the depressed classes (Dalits) in other parts of India still lived in darkages, the depressed classes of Mysore in the 20th century underwent a process of socio-economic transformation. This resulted in their self-assertion in bigaray. The paper focuses on this issue.

Kew words: Depressed classes, Political and economic changes, social and educational changes in Dalits

Introduction

In the Mysore region two castes namely the Holeyas and the Madigas were traditionally considered to be untouchables. Regarding the Holeyas of the Mysore province, the following account is given in the Mysore Census Reports of 1891 and 1901. "The Holeyas number 502, 493 persons, being 10.53 per cent. of the total population. They constitute, as their name implies, the back-bone of cultivation in the country. HOLA is the Kanarese name for a dry-crop field, and HOLEYA means the man of such field. The caste has numerous sub-divisions, among which are Kannada, Gangadikara, Maggada (loom), and Morasu. The holeyas are chiefly employed as labourers in connection with agriculture, and manufacture with hand-loom of various kinds of coarse cloth or home-spun, which are worn extensively by the poorer classes, notwithstanding that they are being fast supplanted by foreign cheap fabrics. In some parts of the Mysore district, considerable numbers of the Holeyas are specially engaged in betel-vine gardening. I thank my doctoral supervisor, Prof. Sebastian Joseph for his valuable suggestions during the preparation of this paper.

As labourers they are employed in innumerable pursuits, in which manual labour preponderates."¹ The Madigas, who are known as the left-hand caste, are regarded as lower than the Holeyas, or the right-hand caste in the social scale.

¹ Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, 1909, Vol-2, p. 332.

According to the Census of 1921, the Madigas numbered 2,96,821, of whom 1,39,386 were males. They are distributed over all the districts, though the four districts of Mysore, Bangalore, Kolar and Tumkur contain 88 per cent of this caste.

The caste is commonly known as Madiga, but they are also styled Edagaiyavaru, or the left-hand faction. Among themselves, they apply the terms Jambavas, Padmajatiyavaru and Matangas, as being more euphemistic. Panchamas is a word which has been recently invented to apply to this and the Holeyas caste, as a term not possessing the association suggested by the more familiar names, with a low social status. Chambara and Begara are also names which others apply to this caste. Chandala and Antyaja are bare nick-names, when special emphasis was given to imply the inferiority of this caste.

Madigas are generally workers leather. They have a primitive way of tanning and preparing it. They first apply chunam (chuna) to the hides of cows and buffaloes, and keep them for some days. Then, in a pit, which they call Galle, and which they consider sacred, a lotion of the bark of the avarlke plant (*Cassia auriculata*) is made, and the skins are soaked in it. They then beat the skins with wooden mallets, and stretch them in the sun to dry. This leather is used for making leather buckets, shoes, and other simple things. Those in towns have recently learnt more refined ways of tanning sheep and goat skins, out of which they prepare shoes and slippers.

When employed as village watchmen, they are known as Talwars. In some places, they enjoy inams for this work, and other times of free service, such as carrying Government property from place to place, and acting as guides from village to village. They are also known as Begaris, as they are bound to serve without remuneration. They are employed as scavengers in large towns, and in small places it is their duty to sweep the villages and keep them clean. These variations in calling do not affect their social status.

Formerly, each family of the Madigas was attached to one or more families of raiyats or agriculturists whose work they had to do, and in return get the customary remuneration. The Madiga was entitled to take the carcass of any cattle that might die in the master's house. This qualified kind of serfdom has, however, all but died out, except in the rural parts.²

Dalith movement in Karnataka came in to existence in 1970. Karnataka government form the backward class commission headed by L G Havanur in 1972. This committee submitted its report in 1975. In this report he included additional one hundred sub-categories to marge within the scheduled castes. He reported these castes fully backward.³

The communities were originally called in the official records as backward. Once the backward designation began to expand and shift in meaning, these communities were together labeled as the "Depressed Classes". Later the term panchama was used to refer to Holeyas and Madigas, meaning the fifth class outside the four fold Hindu varna system. The term was used to denote these classes who were

² Ananthkrishna Iyer L K, *The Mysore Tribes and Castes*, 1931, Vol-4, p. 125, 165-166.

³ L G Havanur Commission Report, 1975.

considered impure and untouchable. These phrases were used during the debates of the Mysore Representative Assembly during 1920, to refer, to the depressed classes like “Low, filthy people” and animals indicate low social status of the depressed classes.⁴

The two most „unclean“ or untouchable castes were the holeyas and madigas who accounted for 16 percent of the population in 1921.⁵

They were the numerically strongest caste but in spite of this, they had practically no political power, which of course was due to their low position in the caste hierarchy and their absolute lack of resources which could be used as, sources for power. They were primarily agricultural labourers and very few of them were educated like those who had received their education from the missionaries. In 1926 both castes became jointly designated as Adikarnataka.⁶

Role and Significance

Under the princely rule the socio-economic conditions of the depressed castes, marginally improved. In old Mysore, they were relatively better off economically and freer socially compared to costal Andhra and feudal telengana. Land was distributed among the depressed caste thus over a period of time.

The decade of the 1920s was dominated politically by the brahman – non brahman conflict in Mysore state, but this was elite-based, with no rural connection, little articulation of a broad ideology and no effort at mass organizing. Caste associations formed after 1905 included the veerashaiva mahasabha, the vokkaligara Sangha. The Adi-dravida abhi-vriddhi sangha, the kuruba association, and central muslim association, these began to contest Brahman dominance in the mysore administration. In 1918 they submitted a memorandum to the government, and the Miller commission was appointed that year which submitted a report which was accepted by the government, in 1919. This gave representation to the Backward castes but generally ignored the dalits.⁷

Two dalit organizations came in the existence. The Adi-Dravida abhivruddhi sangam was led by Murugesh pillai in 1920s, and apparently Tamil based, though it sought to include Kannadigas; The Adi-Jambava sangha was based on madigas. Both organizations were limited to Bangalore and Mysore. Murugesan Pillai, an assistant woolen master in binny mills, Bangalore, and apparently a tamil non-brahman who was active as a dalit spokesman for three decades was part of the Praja mitra mandal for a while and in 1917 supported the Miller commission. But later distanced himself from non-brahman activities. Chikhahanumanthaiah and chennigaramaiah were among the Kannada Dalits associated with Adi-Jambava sangha.

⁴ Leelah Duskin, The Non-Brahmin Movement in Princely Mysore, Thesis Submitted to University of Pennsylvania, 1974, p. 252-258.

⁵ Bjorn Hettne, The Political Economy of Indirect Rule – Mysore, 1881-1947, New Delhi, p. 139.

⁶ Gail omvedt, Dalits and the Democratic Revolution, New Delhi, 1994, p. 127.

⁷ Ibid, p. 128.

The former, with support from Murugesan Pillai and the tamil brahman reformer Gopalswamy Aiyar (most prominent of the early Brahman patrons of Dalits castes) organized a political conference of Panchamas in 1920.⁸ Ambedkar was invited for this but could not attend this due to a state ban on his entry. Other conferences were organized in 1923 and 1925 by the same group, with M.C.Rajah attending. These conferences passed resolutions on using the Adi-Karnataka and Adi-Dravida terminology. In 1921 an Adi-Karnataka Sangha (ASK) was registered with Gopalswamy Aiyar as the president and the majority of other executive members being non-dalits.

The programme for the Adi-Karnataka sangha included getting students admitted to educational institutions, access to public tanks and wells along with temple entry.

These activities within the framework of the politics of petitions and patronage; as shown in a statement presented to the maharaja in 1920 by Adi-karnataks and Adi-Dravidas of Mysore (apparently Gopalswamy Aiyar was a prominent figure behind this).

On behalf of the 11 lakhs of the Panchama population of the state and in the name of the Adi-Dravida Abhiruddi sangam, I beg to submit our deep spirit of devotion and loyalty... for the great act of emancipation graciously extended to our community... we are an ancient community with a civilization. Philosophy and history of which we reasonably feel proud. We are confident that our present unfavorable conditions are the outcome of our economic degradation. We are confident also that our social conditions will automatically improve with the improvement of our economic situation... our foremost need is education, more education, universal education... our next need is on opportunity to earn a decent living. We pray that at least one special agricultural settlement be organized in each district granting to each settler an extent of at least 5 acres of dry and one acre of wet garden land... by advancing the necessary agricultural capital in some cases. As an additional safeguard we propose that such lands may be declared inalienable for two generations of holders in order to ensure the development of prosperous agriculture communities.⁹

Dalits hardly spoke in their own voice in this process. When anti-untouchability issues, defined as social issues began to be taken up from the end of the 1920s, it was by caste hindu organization, primarily Brahman dominated like the Mysore league against untouchability (a joint organization of the praja paksha and congressmen which pressed for an anti-untouchability bill between 1930 and 1935).

These called for the right of dalits to use all temples, roads, public places and tanks, joined with support for limited economic demands (getting govt. lands) and stressed internal reforms such as cleanliness, giving up meat-eating and drinking of alcohol and the propagation of a Brahman Hinduism.¹⁰

In a 1925 Assembly debate, Murugesan Pillai claimed that Dalits were being, asked to do all types of menial services and were harassed and boycotted if they refused. He asked that they be relieved

Ibid, p. 130.

Ibid, p. 131.

Ibid, p. 132.

entirely of these duties or else paid directly by the government act of a special cess collected from peasants.¹¹

From 1920 onwards Dalits were also asking for government waste lands and other lands for cultivation. They asked for land at concessional rates in the newly irrigated tracts of the Irwin canal, but this was refused. In October 1931 the Dewan made a major speech claiming that the governments programme of settling Adi-karnatakas and land and giving them a proprietary interest is making very satisfactory progress, with 9,763 acres given that year. In this case muruges h pillai also appears as a spokesman for getting such benefits as rights and not grants for uplift remarking that a large proportion of the land revenue... is on account of the labourers who are all panchamas, and it is but right that the government give them all the required facilities. But such language of rights was rare. Even in the assembly debates, Dalits Spoke out very little themselves on social issues; they were more vocal on economic issues such as land, education traditional caste duties, while the social issues were presented in a conservative, Hinduizing fashion, with Brahman dominant as spokesmen and non-brahman silent or opposing. There was no organizing of any campaigns though some local clashes had been reported over the issue of tank water by the late 1920s in the various villages.¹²

Conclusion

Among other organizations that worked in the field of welfare of panchamas mention may be made of civic and social progress association established in Bangalore. This organization was mainly involved in organizing lectures on temperance, sanitation, hygiene and cleanliness. The yuvaraja was one of the patron of this organization and was keenly interested in the activities of the association. The kengeri Gurukula Ashrama was another organization which had opened a free boarding home and was running a school for panchama students. The deena seva sangha established at malleshwaram in Bangalore was involved in welfare activiries of panchamas who were working in textile mills oft bangalore. The sangha started its work in slums inhabited by mill workers. The sangha started a day and night school in bangalore which had a strength of 225 bys and 60 girls. The kaniyara sangha organized for the social upliftment of kaniyara community was established by some liberal broad minded Brahmins.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 132.

¹² Ibid, p. 133.