

The Kanara-Coorg Rebellion of 1837: Trends in Recent Regional Writings

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Abstract: *The British colonial policies produced dissent, protests and anti-colonial rebellions everywhere in India and these rebellions took place almost regularly as colonialism spread with the progress of conquests and annexations of the Indian territories. Karnataka was no exception and one comes across numerous peasant rebellions, tribal uprisings, etc. as a reaction to the impact of colonial rule. One major anti-British movement was the Kanara-Coorg Rebellion of 1837, also called the Kalyanaswamy Rebellion, Kalyanappana Katakai, Amarasulya 'Dange', etc. Some scholars have looked into the problem of the origin, progress impact and character of this movement, which shook the British rule to its edifice in both Coorg or Kodagu and South Kanara for some time before it was crushed with a heavy hand. It is a shining example of the spirit of independence that people in the region cherished and their desire to get rid of the colonial yoke. It was a peasant uprising. The historiography of the rebellion is interesting, instructive and ever-growing. Apart from the colonial writings, which try to belittle the significance of it by brushing it aside as a 'mere Gowda affair', we have a vast corpus of indigenous writings, which project the movement as a 'war of independence'.*

Keywords: Kanara-Coorge, Rebellion, Anti British Movement

1. Introduction

This article intends to take stock of the recent writings on the problem; the ever-growing regional or local writings and debates try to reinterpret the whole story as the work of a particular community or a regional group and try to seek in the movement a kind of identity, which denies space for the contributions of the other elements. The people of Kodagu, especially the Kodavas are sought to be projected as 'collaborators', whose 'connivance' led to the failure of the anti-British movement. The attempt to appropriate the struggle to promote caste identities has revived interest in the rebellion, resulting in historiography efflorescence, though it is mostly from non-historians. This article will survey the recent trends. The Kanara-Coorg Rebellion or the Kalyanaswamy Rebellion or Kalyanappana Katakai as it is popularly called, has been a subject of debate ever since it occurred. This regional resistance movement broke out in 1837 and it was the culmination of the secret efforts that began in 1834, when the British took over Kodagu, to overthrow the colonial domination and restore the Haleri rule in Kodagu.

2. Methodology

This paper intends to discuss the recent writings by the regional scholars on this great event which had put an end to the British rule for about a week or two in Mangalore and created a sense of 'freedom' among the natives. The first part of the paper deals with the origin, causes, progress and suppression of the rebellion. The second part deals with the historiography of the movement from colonial times up to the 1990's. The third part is a survey of the recent writings by the regional or native scholars, which highlight the fact that this event still retains its hold in the popular memory of the region. The earliest writings on the movement belong to the colonial period. The reports of C. R. Cotton, Mark Cubbon's observations, M. Lewin's reports, Richter's *Coorg Gazetteer*, etc., provide detailed information on the movement. While the reports

of Cotton and Lewin provide the official versions of the movement, the local sources are not forthcoming in enough numbers. Richter rejects the movement as a mere 'Gowda affair' and almost all the colonial records take the same stand against the rebellion. After independence, several works emerged on these issues and the same are discussed here.

3. Discussion

As regards the origin, after the annexation of Kodagu, the British administration retransferred the Maganes of Amara Sullia and Puttur (Maganes mean taluk subdivisions) to the Kanara collectorate on the pretext of administrative convenience. It may be noted that they were given to the Raja of Kodagu, Dodda Virarajendra in 1804 in recognition of his services in eliminating the Sultan of Mysore, Tipu. However, the transfer of these areas, which was also called the lower Kodagu created severe hardships to the inhabitants of the Maganes (taluk subdivisions). The mode of payment of revenue was in cash in the Kanara collectorate and the inhabitants found it difficult to adjust to the new system, which created room for their exploitation by the money lenders, merchants or the middlemen. The other aspects such as the system of levying taxes on the sale of agricultural products or articles of daily consumption, the salt and tobacco monopoly, the new judicial system etc., were not liked by the people.

Under the Rajas of Kodagu, the pre-colonial system prevailed and the inhabitants never encountered the hardships they had been now exposed to. As N. Shyam Bhat observes "All these factors made the people of South Kanara, especially of the retransferred areas, hostile to the British, who were looked upon as hated intruders. Naturally, Kalyanaswamy's call for a rebellion provoked a considerable response from the natives. They believed that the Haleri rule represented happier days. . . which they hoped to rescue. Thus the rebellion bore a restorative character but was nurtured by certain deep-seated

resentment which the people felt against the British policies" (Shyam Bhat, p.170). Thus, the revolt was a spillover of Coorg politics and Kalayanaswamy, in the same way as Budi Basappa of the Nagara division claimed to be a descendant of the Haleri family and promised the natives that he re-establishes the monarchy with their support.

Ever since the occupation of Kodagu in 1834, there had been secret efforts to overthrow British rule. The anti-British movement was led by three leaders in succession, Aparampara Swamy and Kalyanaswamy in Kodagu and Putta Basappa in South Kanara. This Putta Bassappa styled himself as Kalayanaswamy, claimed that he was Veerappa Odeya, a relation of Chikkaveera the deposed Kodagu Raja. This article focused mainly on the rebellion of this Kalayanaswamy who declared himself the Raja and Kodagu. Kedambadi Rama Gowda of Sullia, Hulikadida Nanjaya of North Kodagu were the advisors of Kalayanaswamy. Kujugodu Appayya, Guddemane Appaiah Gowda, and Malamana Mallappa Gowda were the other lieutenants of Kalyanaswamy. The rebellion broke out violently with the assassination of Atlur Ramappayya in the last week of March 1837. He was the brother of Kodagu diwan Laxminarayanayya. He was a loyal supporter of the British and revealed all the secret plans of Kalyanaswamy and his supporters to them. His brother Laxminarayanayya and the other Kodava diwans of the British, Apparanda Bopanna and Cheppudira Ponnappa were also stood by the Government and the last two played an important role in the suppression of the revolt. The rebels had an eye on Mangalore which was the district capital and proceeded towards Mangalore and occupied it. Laxmappa Banga of Nandavar and Manjappa Heggade of Dharmasthala also lent support to the rebels. Once Mangalore was captured, the rebels under Kalyanaswamy tried to persuade the Coorgs to break into rebellion but they were unsuccessful.

The British made a comeback, captured Mangalore and started punishing the rebels. Kalayanaswamy was captured at Manjarabad and executed in June 1837 in Mangalore. Thus, one of the glorious chapters in the history of freedom struggle came to an end. One of the earliest writings on the movement in the post-independence period was by a noted author, Niranjana, a native of Sullia, who wrote a historical novel under the title '*Kalayanaswamy*' in 1956. He considered the rebellion as a freedom movement in which people belonging to different castes, tribes and religious communities. He refuses to believe that Kalyanappa was a freebooter, robber or bandit. He cites the honours and rewards that were conferred to the Kodavas after the suppression of the movement with the citation '*For distinguished conduct and loyalty to the British Government, Coorg, April 1837*' and contends that just because they captured a thief it is difficult to believe that the British conferred so many rewards to the Kodavas (Niranjana, p.192).

Another noted writer, who discussed it in the 1950's and later on, made an elaborate reference to the event in his popular work '*Kodagina Ithihasa*' was D. N. Krishnaiah

from Kodagu. He takes a critical view of the movement about its failure. For him, it was a prelude to the 1857 movement. The change in the mode of payment of revenue, and also like administration in the 'lower Coorg' region, now attached to the south Kanara collectorate were primarily responsible for the anti-British feelings. He also throws light on the role played by a few individual leaders in fomenting anti-British sentiments in the region. For him, though the rebellion was confined to a district, it aimed to end the British rule and restore Raja's rule in Kodagu and hence it was backward-looking. As regards its failure, Krishnaiah opines that the people of the region were not politicized enough to understand the meaning of nationalism and independence, as we understand them today. Therefore, it failed (D. N. Krishnaiah p.18-20). After the 150th anniversary celebration of the event was held in the region, Amara-Sullia, where the rebellion broke out, several books and write-ups came out on the event. The writers, most of whom belonged to the areas which witnessed the disturbances in 1837 and belonged to different academic and non-academic pursuits. These regional writers sought to project the Kanara-Coorg rebellion as a war of independence by the people of their region, for eg. Amara Sullia and appropriate it as being the work of one major community; these writers due to their inability to refer to the original documents which serious students of history do, resorted to producing historical novels, fictional writings and plays glorifying the activities of the leaders, thereby seeking a regional identity for their community. The recent writings do not take up the issues of colonial exploitation and ever-expanding British imperialism in India; instead, they ask such questions as, why did the rebellion take place in lower Kodagu? Why did the people of Kodagu, especially the Kodavas remain neutral during the revolt? What was the role played by the diwans such as Laxminarayanayya, Apparanda Bopu and Cheppudira Ponnappa? Whether the Kodava Diwans were instrumental in the suppression and failure of the movement?

One of the serious works that appeared in 1998 was N. Shyam Bhat's '*South Kanara (1799-1860): A Study in Colonial Administration and Regional Response*'. The author discusses the causes of the revolt, the outbreak of the rebellion, its progress and suppression and also the character. For him, it was a popular rebellion as well as a peasant rebellion; it was a primary resistance that aimed to end the British rule and restore the old order. The Coorgs did not participate in the movement, he observes, for various reasons. 'The inhabitants of Coorg knew that there existed no real descendant of the Haleri family. They never had any genuine grievances to oppose the government either, for the company administration had not yet made itself felt in Coorg. The two diwans of Coorg at Mercara-Bopu and Ponnappa, dissuaded the Coorgs from joining hands with the rebels (Shyam Bhat p.180).

Purushotham Bilimale attributes the failure of the movement to the differences that existed between the Kodavas and the Gowdas which were the result of the 'divide and rule' policy of the British Government. But Shyam Bhat rejects this view.

One more work that appeared in the same period was N. S. Deviprasad Sompaje's '*Amara Sullia Swatantra Samara*'. It is a collection of colonial records and a few articles on the rebellion with a detailed introduction. Deviprasad attempts to highlight the contributions of the Amara Sullia region in the anti-British struggle and calls it, not the liberation struggle of the Kanara people against the British, but as the freedom struggle of the inhabitants of the Amara Sullia region. B. Janardhan Bhat in his review criticises Deviprasad for limiting the significance of the movement to Sullia only. Deviprasad does not forget to give a list of Kodavas who stood by the British and received honours to highlight the point that it was the Coorgs who were responsible for the failure of the movement (Deviprasad, p.70).

B. Janardhan Bhat refuses to allow Deviprasad to confine the struggle to Amara Sullia only; he says it was a struggle which engulfed the entire South Kanara. However, he is not in favour of calling the movement as Kodagu-Kanara Rebellion, as he thinks that the Coorgs never participated in it. Except that the issue of Raja of Kodagu influenced the movement, there was nothing to be associated with Kodagu. Like many other scholars, he opines that it was a freedom movement of Dakshina Kannada.

Prabhakara Neermarga's historical novel '*Mangalooru Kranti*', published in 2006, calls the rebellion 'Mangalooru Kranti' and shifts the focus from Amara Sullia to Mangalore. My discussion with him made me understand the reasons for this shift; Mangalore was the capital of the South Kanara collectorate. The fall of Mangalore signified the end of British rule in South Kanara; it was here that the ring leaders of the rebellion such as Kalyanaswamy, Kedambadi Rama Gowda and others were hanged (that is at Bikarna Katte). The very recapture of the Mangalore town by the British signified the end of '*Mangalooru Kranti*'. One interesting thing that we come across in his work is that he projects Laxmappa Bangarasa of Nandavara in a poor light. He calls him a lecher, given himself to an immoral life. It is a kind of deconstruction that Prabhakara indulges in. One of his heroes is Bhiranna Bunta, whom D. K. Chowta has caricatured as a 'rogue' in his Tulu novel '*Mittabail Yamunakka*'. Prabhakara Neermarga has also written a Tulu play on this theme under the caption, '*Bheekara Nyaya Katte*'. He does not come down heavily on the Kodava diwans, as the other writers, mainly from Sullia do. The most recent work on this theme is Prabhakara Shishila's '*Moodanada Kempu Kirana*', a historical novel on the last days of Chikka Veera, the early activities of Aparampara Swamy and the rebellion of Kalyanaswamy. The author, while highlighting the role of all the participants of the Sullia region - his territory, comes down heavily on the Coorgs and the Coorg Diwans - Boppana and Ponnappa. He criticises them for siding with the British administration for personal gains at the expense of freedom (p.33). Throughout the book, he pours venom on them. He never uses the same language against Atlur Ramappayya, the one who leaked the information of the rebellion to the British, against Le Hardy, the Superintendent of Kodagu, who arrested Diwan Laxminarayana and kept him in jail, against Ranga Baliga of Buntwal, Padi Subbayya

Shanubogue, Kumbala Raja, who helped the British during this period, or the people who were responsible for the capture of Kalyanaswamy. He is more interested in appropriating the credit of the revolt for his region, maybe for the Gowda community. Since his medium of expression is literature, it provides ample opportunity to use his pen against a community with impunity. Korana Saraswati, K. R. Vidyadhar, Pratima P. S. and others also discuss the role played by the Gowda community, especially in the movement and they too were critical of the role played by the Kodava diwans. The recent writings do not discuss the character of colonialism; never ask questions as to why Kalyanaswamy proceeded first to Mangalore and not to Madikeri. They do not discuss the difference between the natures of administration in Coorg and in South Kanara. For them, the assassination of Atlur Ramappayya, which triggered the outbreak of the rebellion, the role of a few local people in helping the British suppress the rebellion, etc., are not important issues. They refer frequently to the issue of the failure of the movement and claim that had the Coorgs joined the movement it would have been a success! Success in terms of what? They do not think even for a moment that defeating the British imperial power and liberating South Kanara and Coorg permanently would have been an impossible thing. Much of the recent literature is apportioning the blame for the failure of the rebellion mainly to the Coorgs.

4. Conclusion

Thus, a plethora of literature is available on the 1837 rebellion; much of it is semi-historical and fictional. However, they can play an important role in identity creation and image building as far as communities are concerned. Though they make use of historical documents, the caste and regional feelings and historical experience shape their thinking. Therefore, we find only clichés and lack of perceptions of the real nature of colonialism in these writings. These seem to be attempts to appropriate the movement by a particular community or a region by denying space for others.

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