



The native ruler's policy about the Christians of South Canara depicted in the European writings

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Abstract: This article tries to show how the European writings depicted the native rulers policy towards the Christians of South Canara. The European travelogues, missionary and colonial official documents were utilized as primary sources for the article. The rulers of Vijayanagara portrayed as tolerant and supportive towards Christians and even the attempt of conversion by the Portuguese missionary tolerated by them. The European writings considers it was under Keladi rulers the large number of Christians settled in South Canara. About Mysore Sultans, the European writings in general consider that the policy of Hyder towards Christians was liberal while Tipu followed the policy of suppression. Even there were difference among the European writings about the policy followed by Tipu Sultan towards the Christians of South Canara.

Key Words: Rulers, Christians, European Writings

Christianity entered India within a century of its establishment to the western coasts of Kerala. On the basis of St. Bartholomey tradition it was argued that the Christian settlement was established in Barkur and Kallianpura and it was also stated the Syrian Christians settled in South Canara in the early stages of Christianity. But lack of historical evidence poses a problem to argue it vehemently.¹ Vasanth Madhava opines that Portuguese documents and local traditions refer to the Christian settlement in different parts of coastal Karnataka prior to the sixteenth century.

The Rulers of Vijayanagara and Keladi

The earliest authentic records of Christian activities in Canara began with the advent of the Portuguese.² It was stated that the embassy of Frei Luis do Salvador to Vijayanagara was responsible to receive permission from the emperor to preach and to construct churches.³ In the 1520's, the Franciscans managed to establish a mission in Mangalore and they erected three churches in the region; Nossa Senhora do Rosario (Our lady of the Rosary) in Mangalore, Nossa Senhora das Mercês (Our Lady of Mercy) in Ullal and Sao Francisco de Assis in 'Farangipet'.⁴ In 1534 Canara was known to the missionaries as 'the land of mission' and it was placed under the jurisdiction of the newly created bishopric of Goa.⁵ It was argued that this evangelization was tolerated by the Vijayanagara rulers, mainly because the region

was on the periphery of the empire and the converts belonged to the lower castes.⁶ The dependency over the Portuguese for the supply of horses also reason for the silence of the Vijayanagara rulers about the conversion activities of the missionaries in South Canara. Vasantha Madhava endorses this opinion by stating that Krishnadevaraya's policy towards the Portuguese was responsible for the spread of Christianity in South Canara.⁷ Rajath V argues that, prior to the sixteenth century there was no documentary evidence for the mass conversion of the local people in South Canara. According to him, the Christians formed mainly through migrations from Goa through successive waves due to persecution from the Marathas, Famine and Inquisition of 1560. It is also suggested that the enterprising nature of the Christians was also responsible for them being invited by the Vijayanagara and Ikkeri rulers.⁸ Thus Roman Catholics from Goa migrated to Mangalore in three major waves, the first after 1560, the second after 1570, and the third in about 1683.⁹

The earliest attempts to convert the native rulers by the Christian missionaries is found in an anonymous letter of a traveler written in Venice to Ser Zuane di Santi dated Nov. 10, 1511, kept in Biblooteca Magiabecchina at Florence which states that the King of Vijayanagara was very near becoming a Christian.¹⁰ The second expedition to India in 1500 with Pedro Alvares Cabral as its Captain-Major included the first missionaries; eight Franciscans, one of them Frei Luis do Salavador, visited Vijayanagara and tried to convert its ruler Krishnadevaraya into Christianity and fail in this mission.¹¹ Though Krishnadevaraya allowed or tolerated the Missionaries attempt to convert the natives.¹² The difficulty of conversion is narrated by the missionaries in their letters. The missionary Aleessandro Valignano, considered interior conversion as true conversion of the heart, which would inevitably lead to a complete cultural conversion which was impossible for Indians.¹³ Even after attentively listening to the Christian message in the native language, the natives showed no interest in conversion.¹⁴ Italian Jesuit Alessandro Leni in 1599 and at the turn of the century Robert de Nobili in Madurai Mission dressed like an Indian ascetic, following the native methods of worship tried to convert the local people.¹⁵ Thus the missionaries became paganized (Nobili known as a Roman Brahman) in their appearance and method of worship. About the conversion of the women of the coastal region, Correa says that it was done according to the wishes of the women.¹⁶ But his own description reveals that the women chose Christianity out of compulsion as they had no other choice. The rulers of Keladi, Venkatappa Nayaka, Chennamaji and Shivappa Nayaka allowed the Christians to settle and construct churches in South Canara. Western Carmelite friar, de Santa Maria, who visited the Canara coast in 1657, states that there were six thousand Christians in the kingdom of Sivappa Nayaka.

The rule of Mysore Sultans

Under the Mysore Sultans these Christians increased numerically and in the later stages they faced ill treatment by them. The Mysore sultans were suspicious about

the native Christians support to the British against them, In 1768, Hyder warned the Christians of South Canara against supporting the English East India Company, still he did not take any harsh step towards them. The Portuguese signed a treaty with Hyder on 13th August 1771 by which they received permission to preach Christianity in his kingdom.¹⁷ On the basis of European accounts Mascarenhas W.X states that, under Hyder the Christians of Canara remained free from persecution and there was a reference of issuing grants to the Roman Catholic Church at Calicut and Parappannagadi.¹⁸ Buchanan differentiates the religious policy of Hyder and Tipu. For him Hyder followed a tolerant policy while Tipu was considered as a bigot. Even when the officials of the Company criticize Hyder, Buchanan disagrees with it.¹⁹ Buchanan also informs that, under the reign of Hyder, the Christians of South Canara possessed considerable estates in land, and all of this was confiscated by Tipu and distributed it to others.²⁰

The depiction of the sufferings of the Christians under Tipu in European writings did not offer single tale. Majority of them though critique of Tipu's policy yet some of them tries to focus the reasons behind his policy. According to Major Campbell, during the conflict between Tipu and English in 1783, three local Christians supported the English. Among these one was known as Francis Pinto who was appointed as an ensign of a battalion of Christians in the English army.²¹ But in 1784 it was stated that, two Christians were said to have acted as spies and guides for the English invasion to Mangalore. It is also argued that after the conquest of Bedanore, the army of General Mathews showed atrocities towards the people of Bidanur in which the close relatives of the Sultan were also involved.²² Two French writers state that Tipu's family was at the place and that they escaped in a little boat along the river Tungabhadra.²³

The harsh treatment meted out to the Christians of Canara is reported by the British. It contained the reports of ex-prisoners, soldiers, missionaries and administrators. James Bristow and James Scurry as ex-prisoners of Tipu, give first-hand information about the policy of Tipu as well as the suffering of the Christians. Following Mary Louse Prat's term, Teltscher refers these literatures as 'survival literature'. Teltscher further states that in this form of literature, the author tries to raise their own status as survivors by heightening inhuman representation of their captor.²⁴ She also notes that both Bristow and Scurry served as low-ranking soldiers during the second Mysore war and their accounts figure among the first works on India not written by members of the educated elite.²⁵ Edward Moor, who served as an officer in the Third Mysore War and in 1794, at the age of 23, published a narrative of the Operations of Captain Little's Detachment, and of the Maratha Army, during the late confederacy in India, against the Nawab Tipu sultan Bhahadur.²⁶ Moor sets up an opposition between the popular view of Tipu and the elite view, an unreasonable despot for unthinking lower classes and a reasonable monarch for the educated man.²⁷ William Kirkpatrick, who, in 1811, published the Select Letters of Tipu Sultan, and these letters discovered in Tipu's palace at the fall of Seringapatam. Kirkpatrick through the texts of Tipu, tries

to reveal the real face of the Sultan to the reader. Yet, Teltscher notes that, for all his declared aspiration to editorial invisibility, Kirkpatrick's voice frequently intervenes in commentaries on the letters throughout the collection.²⁸ Kirkpatrick states that the Christians of South Canara joined the army and were divided into Risals or corps of five hundred men, and a person of reputed and upright character was placed as risladar. He further informs that these Christians along with their women and children were converted to Islam and the appellation of Ahmedy was bestowed upon them as a collective body.²⁹ John Charles Sheen, an ensign in Mathews' army, published in full as an appendix to Henry Oake's Authentic Narrative of the treatment of the English, who were Taken Prisoner on the Reduction of Bednore by Tipu Saib of 1785. Teltscher states that Sheen's letter was first printed in the Annual Register of 1783 and later printed in New Annual Register. In 1799 the letter reappeared in the works of Thomas Pennant which was known as Authentic Memoirs of Tipu Sultan, and the View of Hindustan. Sheen treats the incident as a retaliatory measure by Tipu against the Christians of South Canara.³⁰

The colonial officials like Campbell, Buchanan, Munro, Ravenshaw report the incident and present Tipu's atrocities against Christians. Later, the missionaries and the native Christian scholars have written extensively about it. Barring the difference in the number of Christians in the incident, all these accounts narrates the cruel treatment faced by the Christians in the hands of Tipu. The number of Christians suffered under Tipu varies in the European writings.³¹ The traveller cum colonial official, Buchanan notes that under the Ikkeri rule Feringy Petta near Arcula was inhabited by numerous Christians of Konkana. He states that, in 1784 Tipu destroyed the city and carried away its inhabitants. Quite lately, about the captivity of the Christians of South Canara Munro states that, the Christian men, women and children numbering above sixty thousand were seized in one night and sent into captivity to Mysore.³² He also mentions that Tipu destroyed many cities and forced its inhabitants to move towards Jambalabad.³³ European administrative accounts also mentions that, Tipu drove all the Portuguese out of Canara and caused several of their vicars to be sent to Goa.³⁴

Ravenshaw, the colonial official reports about the same event, but wrongly states the year of the event as 1782. He opines that about 80,000 Christians were seized and sent to Shar Ganj near Srirangapatnam. He also notes that in addition to these persecution, their property was confiscated and churches were demolished or converted into mosques or pulled down to build houses for the officials. Ravenshaw notes that later as many as 13000 Christians returned to South Canara.³⁵ Munro informs about the demand of restoration of their land by the Canara Christian proprietors which they had lost because of their captivity by Tipu. During the Captivity these proprietors' lands were confiscated, and either given away, or sold to men of other castes for a price far below their value.³⁶ During Hyder's government the Christians possessed considerable estates in hand, all of which were confiscated by Tipu and immediately bestowed on persons of other castes from whom it was

difficult to recover.³⁷ Tipu's cruelty against the British and Christians of South Canara was justified by some of the European writings on the following grounds. In his letter Sheen opines that the ill treatment meted out to the women of the harem in Anantpur and atrocities at Bedanur was responsible for the cruelty shown by Tipu against General Mathews and English Prisoners. Thus Tipu's harsh measures is seen by Sheen not as cruelty, but as the 'Principle of Retaliation'. Teltscher states that for Sheen, the British misconduct refashions Tipu into a reasonable opponent, or at least one whose motives and actions are understandable.³⁸ According to some British writers, Tipu's treasury in Bidanuru was emptied by the British and it was the reason for the cruel retaliation by Tipu.³⁹ Quite lately the missionary writings narrate the incident. Abbe Dubois reports the event in his letters and considers that it was a step by Tipu to extend Islam on all his dominions. In Mysore for this purpose he converted the inhabitants to Islam. He also refers the event of the capture of the Christians of South Canara through secret orders of Tipu in 1784. He also portrays the sufferings of the Christians at the hand of Tipu, yet his criticism lies on Christians rather than on Tipu. According to him the Christians captured by Tipu were not, true believers in the sense that they were tamely submitted and converted to Islam without any protest. He also narrates the return of 20000 Christians of South Canara. He wishes that the same event would once again happen to them in order to show the true spirit of Christianity by opposing the forceful conversion by becoming martyrs. He concludes by stating that even if the incident repeats, the Christians would tamely submit to the opponent.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Thus the role of the native rulers while settling the Christians in South Canara vividly narrated by the European writings. The entry of the Christians under Vijayanagara and the increase of their number under Keladi rule recorded in the European writings. The different waves in which the Christians of Goa came to coastal Karnataka and established themselves also observed by the Europeans. The portrayal of Mysore Sultans also not similar. For Buchanan Hyder was liberal and Tipu was bigot. The sufferings of Christians of South Canara though was widely reported with all criticism against Tipu, there was no uniformity. For some British, Tipu appeared as completely 'cruel bigot' and for some other British writers, it was a step of retaliation so he was a 'reasonable tyrant'. Missionaries like Abbe Dubbois feels that the fault lies with the native Christians who submitted to Tipu's cruelty without any resistance. For some the wrath of Tipu is not limited to the Hindu or Christians but also includes Muslims. Those who oppose him had to face his wrath against them. For example, Buchanan notes that the oppression of Tipu is not limited to Christians or Hindus. He states that, his oppression of Malabar Muslim traders reduced them to poverty.⁴¹

End Notes:-

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