CHAPTER VII

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This study on Society and Politics in South Kanara A.D 1500-1800, fills up a gap in the historiography of South Kanara, a region, located on the Karnataka coast which has retained fairly strong local traditions along with its own version of major historical developments. Many of these versions have come to be articulated through commonly accepted notions about the nature of local events and issues. The study has been taken up in the larger perspective of the socio-economic history of late medieval India. In this study, a huge array of primary and secondary sources have been extensively used. Epigraphical, literary sources, administrative reports, foreign accounts, folklore, kadata and a wide variety of published works in English, Portuguese and Kannada have been used in the completion of this study.

Agriculture and agrarian-based production thrived as the two pillars of the economy of this region. According to the traditional notion, Parashuram ksetra is known for the fertility of soil, abundant rainfall and wealth. The region under study has a variety of flora and fauna. It has mountains, valleys, rivers and ports. South Kanara has Arabian Sea as its western boundary. It is almost straight, but in some places it is broken by rivers, rivulets, small streams, etc. These rivers influenced the agrarian system of the region, provided water resources for intensive cultivation and served as highways for the transportation of agricultural products from the coast to the foot hills of the Ghats. These rivers were also extensively used for bringing products to the coastal ports and towns. The backwaters and salt water lagoons provided great facilities for traffic. Therefore the rivers on the one
hand facilitated transport and on the other provided fertile land for agricultural production. The mouths of these rivers were suited for ports where sea-faring activities were in full swing.

The agrarian character of the region suggests that the economic life of the people centered round the incomes derived from agricultural products. Consequently, agriculturalists formed an important section of the South Kanara society. It is evident that geography as well as topography of the region greatly contributed towards agricultural activities of the region. Agriculture produced the raw materials required for trade as well as industries of the region. Geographical factors favoured the cultivation of food and commercial crops such as paddy, coconut, sugar-cane, cashewnut, arecanut, pepper and a wide variety of vegetables and fruits. Increased cultivation led to the expansion of the economy. However, the agricultural activities were left at the mercy of nature. The fertility of soil, the fortunes of the monsoons and the river flowing directions were determining factors in the agricultural activities.

The flourishing agrarian economy and the surplus production in the primary sector created favourable conditions for the development of industries, industrial production and trading activities. Trade was carried out in both agricultural and industrial products. This included inland trade and sea trade between various regions in the country as well as with countries like Persia and others. This eventually led to urbanization and the emergence of commercial economy.

Agriculture was not the only economic activity in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in South Kanara. Cities, Ports and towns scattered all over South Kanara Coast as well as in the interior, emerged important
centers of commercial activity. These towns and harbors encouraged the
growth of internal and external trading activity. It is apparent, however, that
the range of commercial transactions was immense, not only in geographical
extent but also in terms of the large sums of money involved.

Apart from the indigenous business class, the European trading
companies in India had begun to assume greater significance by the
sixteenth century A.D. Through these trading companies the economy of
South Kanara established a crucial connection with Europe. The increased
demand in Europe for Indian commodities, such as pepper made possible the
integration of South Kanara with outside world. Textiles acted as an
incentive for greater production, creating new jobs in South Kanara. It was
nevertheless, long before the English came to dominate the Indian economy.

Regarding the topographical and environmental study, the South
Kanara inscriptions have immense value. The distinct topographical
features of the region are Hadavu (barren land), Niru Hariva Oni (water
flowing lane), Kiri gadde (Paddy field situated near tank), Bengare bailu
(field situated near sea), Uppinagara (salty region), Kuduru (an island
formed by river), Bila gadde (uncultivable land), Hola gadde (land for wet
and dry cultivation), Haravari (grayy land), Hadi (elevated ground covered
with brush wood), Kadu (forest), Gajani (land formed by residing the river
or sea). The post Vijayanagara inscriptions mention the natural calamities
such as gudde jarida Nashta (the damage caused by land slides), Hole
Harida Nashta (the damage caused by the overflow of the river), uppu Niru
ukkida Nashta (damage caused by the overflow of the salty water of the
river) etc; thus indicating the changes in the course of the rivers flowing in
South Kanara region. Measures taken by the rulers and prominent persons to
preserve environmental purity are revealed in a few inscriptions of the periods of the seventeenth and early part of the eighteenth centuries.

Since South Kanara has been the chief producer of valuable agricultural products like pepper, rice, sugar, etc., a large number of Europeans took active interest in enjoying maximum benefits by imposing hegemony over the trading centers of the region. After the fifteenth century, Europeans like the Portuguese, Dutch and the English arrived in South Kanara and they tried to establish their factories in ports like Mangaluru, Basruru, Barkur, and Gangolli. The European element considerably influenced the economy, trade and commerce of South Kanara. The Portuguese signed treaties with the native rulers and tried to obtain supply of necessary provisions for their factories in different parts of India and abroad. During this interaction there were military encounters and political negotiations. This led to proliferation of trade in items like rice, pepper, ginger, iron, saltpeter, etc. The Dutch and the English attempted to compete with the Portuguese. The Dutch established their factories in Mangalore and Basruru. The English also appointed their agents in Mangalore to procure necessary supplies of rice to their settlements in Tellicherry and Bombay.

The strong presence of Europeans also reveals interplay of power-politics. Initially the Portuguese were dominant and were able to enjoy exclusive monopoly over South Kanara pepper trade. They had perfected their gripping influence by developing intimate relations with various indigenous rulers and trading communities. Gradually other Europeans showed an intense trading interest in the region which led to an open rivalry among themselves. The main source of contention is to assert control over Kanara pepper and rice trade. In order to accomplish this task inevitably they
had to develop healthy contact with the native rulers. In this regard they were forced to sign a series of treaties with major and minor powers of the region. These treaties had provisions relating to their political and commercial relations. When the Portuguese were able to impose their terms and conditions on the weaker rulers of the region, the stronger rulers of the regions opposed and they immediately turned against the Portuguese. Politically, these local powers succeeded for a while to assert themselves as they realized that the Portuguese main thrust was to collect rice, pepper and other valuable products from the region which commanded high demands in external markets. The local powers sometimes went even to the extent of bargaining with the Portuguese for higher price. However the arrival of the Dutch and English traders in addition to the Portuguese intensified the bargaining strategy of indigenous rulers of the period.

Topographical features and the other historical factors which contributed to the regional identity of South Kanara, also influenced the organization of its administrative divisions. Administrative convenience facilitated many integrating forces which were knitting the region into a closer unit. Local society and polity were subjected to a variety of stresses and the administrative system responded by transgressing the formal administrative divisions and sub-systems of the earlier governmental system. Further, the maintenance of an effective revenue machinery contributed immensely to the stability and integrity of the region. The rulers who ruled directly or indirectly realized the importance of encouraging trade and agriculture because both trade and agricultural activities brought considerable revenue to the state exchequer. Greater involvement of farmers in the cultivation of commercial crops provided an ample scope for the
development of trade and that ensured greater material returns to both farmers and agriculturalists. Therefore the state promotes agriculture which fetched land revenue to the government. It is evident that the expansion of agriculture, trade and formation of urban centers were actually the handy work of rulers and traders. Urban centers like Mangaluru, Buntwal, Mudabidre, Barakuru, Basruru, Karkala, Bainduru, Gangolli were not only the centers of trade but also served as headquarters of different ruling families. Finally the revenue policies of the rulers considerably influenced the expansion of the cultivation of commercial products and taxes and levies on these products fetched substantial revenue to the treasury.

The social structure reveals the existence of social stratification of the region and the liberal attitudes of the ruling families in the process of social control. They in fact, kept aside the deployment of the ideas of superiority and inferiority of caste and creed while determining the social status of individuals, at least in theory. This policy of appeasement was necessary to attract the subjects for the acquisition of territories as well as to defend the boundary initially. However, the social structure reveals the presence of various higher and lower castes and communities. In this compartmentalized social organization, the so-called land owning castes, demonstrate their dominant position in the mainstream of social environment. They were assisted by people of low caste particularly in the process of cultivation of their prosperous agricultural land. This reflects social differentiation and unequal distribution of wealth which in the later half of eighteenth century resulted in the outbreak of series of peasant uprisings. Nevertheless, the region throughout the period manifests communal harmony.