CHAPTER - VII

POLITICAL LIFE OF THE KURUBA

Political aspect of a society is the total organisation which involves the control and regulation of the use of political force and the maintenance of social order. Therefore, our study of political life of the Kuruba is concerned with different concepts like power, authority, control and obligations. To understand these we have to study the leadership, both traditional and modern; caste, political organisation etc. Authority can be divided into charismatic, traditional and legal. Further, physical forces and actions, control and formal regulations, maintenance, law and order, dynamic conflict and existed events, decision making, internal and external changes and protection given to the people through internal cooperation and external independence must be thoroughly looked into. Here the leadership among the Kuruba is studied under charismatic, administrative and intellectual types. Because the charismatic leader simplifies and symbolises the values; the administrative leader promotes them; and the intellectual leader elaborates and justifies them by providing the trends of the action (c.f.: Vidyarthi 1967:63 and Andre, Beteille 1969:121).
Therefore in this chapter the political life of the Kuruba of Karnataka is taken up to know their political past, political awareness, involvement, benefits and problems they get from political aspect of their life. The Kuruba community is said to be an archaic society in which the political trends existed and taken on a wide variety of forms organised on a different basis since their early period. But up till now no systematic study of the political activities of the Kuruba is made and therefore the present study aims at a systematic study of the same.

It is hoped that a study of this type will help us to understand the dynamic nature of the Kuruba, relationships of the Kuruba community with others and finally the place of Kuruba in the state politics.

**Political Life of the Kurubas Through the Ages:**

The written political history of Kuruba goes as back as to eighth century. But the early generations had no political system and as such there was no political organisation. Later the Kuruba had political organisation but without recognised territory or state. The political history of the Kuruba can be divided into two phases - primitive and advanced political history. The primitive systems of
political organisation is concerned with the use of physical forces to rule the group or the state, where might was right. Might was used to achieve command over resources or powers over men or on both. This type of a situation prevailed when the Kuruba were nomads and pastoral people.

The present political history is concerned with rational politics, where importance is given only to rational political interaction. The rational political organisation is mainly concerned with social values and status. At this phase the political life of the Kuruba is based on status and contract.

The quality of life of any group is related to its ability to live and live well. The Kuruba had ability to live in the days of hostile - physical and social, environment. In the past, by law of nature, inequalities prevailed. The secret of environmental control was in the ability to conquer it and it was also the source of physical force, intelligence, efforts, fights, aggressiveness, charismatic leadership etc. With the positive support of environmental forces Kuruba got their ability to achieve power among cultural groups.

The Kuruba expanded their control or rule over
other groups by their own strength. On the other hand by this they also competed with invading Aryans to retain their leadership and power. Therefore, they formed small political bands to establish their political hold. Kuruba struggled hard to fight the Aryan forces and became known as Ariya Kings. According to Panini the Ariya dynasties became known as Ayudhajeevi Sangha (c.f. Joshi 1967:69).

In Mahabharata there is a mention of Kuruba. According to which the Kaurava King, Duryodhana, honoured the Kuruba chieftain Yaudeya by inviting him to fight on his side against Pandavas. At that time Kuruba were a mountain group and were known as Malavas. The emperor Chandra Gupta Mourya (Third Century B.C.) called Kuruba chiefs as mighty warriors (Atulaveeras). From the Mouryan history it also becomes evident that the Kuruba were royal leaders and powerful administrators (Gowda 1979:86).

There are also a number of Kuruba dynasties which ruled in India. Among them the early Goparashtra and Satavahana dynasties are well known and they ruled their territories in different regions of India. In Karnataka, they are known by the royal name Hayar. Other Kuruba dynasties like the Pallava, Nāstrakūta, Kaśamba, Sendraka,
Chainkya, Solanki, Anhilwada, Maratha Rajput, Holkar, Pal, Veerasantaki and other big and small chieftains ruled their territories and enjoyed much popularity. These old world political dynasties not only aimed at ruling the land but also in establishing control over others.

The Kuruba rulers continue to rule their territories much later also. According to the Madras Census Report of 1891, the Kuruba or Kurumba are said to be the modern representatives of the ancient Kurumba or Pallava, who were powerful in South India during the Seventh Century. They ruled many regions of South India including Malabar, Nilgiris, Coorg and Mysore. One of the taluks of North Malabar is known as Kurumbanad and it reveals the former greatness of the Kuruba (Anantha Krishna Iyyer 1929:223).

During later period Kurumba or Kuruba were known as Kurunelamannar. The term means subordinate kings (Sāmanta Nājas), chieftains (pālegaras) and leaders in military action etc. They established their kingdom in Tondamandalam and Salapākam and ruled for many years. Among Kuruba Kings the Kamanḍa Prabhu has been said to have restored law and order in his kingdom by his wise administration of Tondamandalam. His (Dravida) territory later became
known as Kurumbabhumai or Kurumbanad. It included dominions of Manaur Kottai, Chenakottai, Tamur Kottai, Payar Kottai, Eiyur Kottai, Putuvar Kottai, Palkumara Kottai, Katikai Kaliyur, Kantirikai Kottai, Velur Kottai, Satapakaur Kottai, Hirampur Kottai and so on.

Although the Kuruba ruled many regions of present South India in fragmented or small provinces, these became a basis for the development of their political authority later. Many kingdoms were established hence under different names like Pallava, Kadamba, Raja of Jinji and Krishmagiri and Yadavas of Devagiri. These kings also ruled their territories with great distinction. Kings of Heggaddevanakote, Manfu and Magadha, Vijayanagar empire, Palegare of Bellary and other small chieftains ruled in various parts of Karnataka. Kings of all these dynasties struggled for the welfare of their community people wherever they be. On the other hand, they also respected other religions. They also established stable governments and became famous as just kings and able administrators. Their desires were to eliminate communal differences, improve the economic sources of the people who were in need to save the people from the sufferings of exploitation, suppression and harassment (Lakkappa Gowda 1981:1-14).
It is also evident from history that the Kuruba rulers gave importance to the general development of the society and culture. In this direction they promoted many cultural activities and also invited many scholars to their court and adorned them with titles and honours. They established seats of learning (agraḥēra) for the Brahmins and scholars. They also constructed religious institutions like temples and rest houses to the pilgrims and travellers.

In the dimension of political history of Kuruba many dynasties, feudatory chieftains, Deshpamukh, leaders, headmen and other important persons took interest and en carved inscriptions about men and events like wars, gifts and land given to temples, scholars and so on. A number of memory stones were also erected. All these things stand as an evidence to the able rule of the Kuruba Kings.

Decline of Kuruba Rule:

As long as the Kuruba were a ruling group, they had the authority, power and status and this had brought leadership to the community. But over the years they gradually lost it to others. Subsequently they lost the political privileges such as the authority and status, as well. Over the years they also lost the sources of
authority and power like the landed property and official status, as a ruling caste.

**Kuruba as Village Settlers:**

The Kuruba as a ruling caste who had fled to forests after their defeat in war and lived rearing sheep there, gradually came down and settled in plains as pastoral group. Later as pointed earlier they also became agriculturists by settling in villages. Coming into village settlement for stay and taking agriculture as their occupation, left them very little to choose since the already settled groups had occupied the best portions and lands. As later immigrants (c.f. Gurumurthy, 1972) they were made to settle at the periphery of the settlement which was refused by other villagers. This reduced their economic status also. In this way the Kuruba as poor and recent immigrants to a village settlement, were reduced to the status of a very insignificant caste. Naturally the role played by them in the field of economic and political life of the village was almost negligible. Moreover their living away from the main stream in the village gave them little opportunities to involve in village matters.

We should note that it took years to the Kuruba settlers to gain a place in village system and also acquire
land, house sites and also the membership to groups and systems social, economic, political and ritual fields. As they improved their status by acquiring more and more landed property which was the main sources of authority and power in the village, they also began to gain a place in the leadership sphere of the village. However owing to their lower socio-economic status compared to other privileged castes, they could not play a significant role either in the village level, political activities or of the region and state. On the contrary the privileged castes had many advantages. They were large in number, owned the best land in the village and also in large quantity. They were also advanced both educationally and politically. These had brought unity and awareness of their people in the region.

Contrary to this, the Kuruba were a underprivileged group. They belonged to a ritually low caste, they were immigrants and above all backward both educationally and politically. They could not compete with the so-called dominant castes in the society (c.f. Srinivas, 1962). They suffered in many respects and fields due to their backwardness and this had brought them a sense of inferiority complex, disunity etc. Among them a few selfish persons
had joined hands with other castes and supported them much against the advantages of their own castemen. All these had reduced the Kuruba to a helpless, backward and underprivileged status. Naturally when the backward caste movement came, the Kurubas were to take advantage of it.

**Kuruba Political Organisation:**

As observed earlier the study of Kuruba social organisation shows that they are divided into a number of sub-castes like Odararu, Halukurubaru, Prathama Sudraru, Indra Sudra and so on. A few had traditional rights and privileges to act as leaders, advisors and adjudicators of disputes. Like the Odararu who had socio-religious control over the community a few other sub-castes had political, social and jural authority over their people. At the times of dispute, crisis and need they provided the needed guidance, leadership and support.

Each clan among the Kuruba is also a socio-economic and politico-ritual unit. They had a few common obligations, duties and activities in all the social, political, economic and ritual spheres. At the time of collective activity they are led by clan leaders. These
clan leaders are men of experience, wisdom and ability. So they are in all respects the traditional type of leaders mentioned by Weber (1947). These leaders act as guides and protectors. When any dispute arise between individuals, lineage or family groups they settle them. At times of dispute between two clans, customary elders from both the clans meet and iron out their differences and later ask their clan members to accept their decision.

At the caste level the ruling clan group retains a few powers and privileges and see that others follow or accept them. Among the Kuruba of the village under study, the Savantlaru clan has this status and its leader acts as their chief. Hattigowda, Gudigowda, Buddhivanta and others are satellite chiefs around them.

The scope of authority vary from the clan level. But there are no divisions or specialisation of tasks associated with each level. The paramount chief, the sub-chief and the sub-sub chief differ only in rank, each collects tribute, holds his own court, settle disputes and performs the whole range of political functions for the settlement. At that time and at each level of authority, there may be specialisation of political roles. There
is a division of tasks between the chief at that level and his associated officials.

Sex, age and biological ties are the decisive criteria for assigning a person to the social role. The male elders perform all the political tasks. Political and sex-kin-age roles are indistinguishable. All related adult males in the locality are the members of the sub-locality council. The family of the locality chief has no special rights to make decisions for the locality as a whole or to settle disputes. The senior males, by right, may have the nominal role of a chief as in the case of Ḫāḍu Kuruba. But besides he may perform a limited administrative role.

With the advancement of democratic and modern political institutions the importance placed on the caste and kinship organisations got weakened among the Kuruba. Because when the role differentiation increases, kinship as an ascriptive role determinant becomes weak, especially when specific political roles begin to emerge. Kinship criteria begin to be displaced by an achievement based on personal ties of loyalty and specific attributes like prowess,
wealth and status and other values salient in the culture.
Kinship need not lose all its importance among Kuruba with highly differentiated political structures. For example, the role of the caste leader falls only to an aspirant within the hereditary line of the royal clan. But an aspirant must have enough skill and reputation to marshall support from other social groups also.

Caste level Panchayat meetings of the Kuruba caste must be conducted in the presence of a hereditary ritual leader like the Odeyaru. Because he is their religious leader at caste level. Therefore it is very important to invite and involve him in all the caste level activities.

At the meeting of caste council the role of traditional leaders like the Hattigowda, Gudigowda, Sudipujari and Buddivanta are important. They can call a meeting to settle a dispute arise out of adultery, property matters, theft, disputes at caste level festivals and so on. Hattigowda acts as the leader (Yajaman) and the Odeyaru acts as a judge. Kolakara works as the locality watchman. The learned or experienced leader finds suitable points from the discussions of the meeting for
settlement, later Gudigowda observes all that happens and suggests proper steps to settle the dispute. Finally the judgement is pronounced by the Odeyaru, in conversation with other leaders.

As we have seen the Kuruba caste is divided into a number of sub-castes which are endogamous. Each of these sub-castes are again divided into a number of exogamous clans and clans into lineages and families. Since sub-castes are localized groups we can find a sub-caste group residing in an area. At the village level, each caste has its own caste council to control its members and at the area level they have the area caste level council. In this way the caste council works at two levels, at the village and the region levels.

A caste council in a village consists of all clan or family elders. The day to day disputes between individuals and families are settled by this council. At the village level, they also resolve disputes between Kuruba caste members.

Inter-village level disputes are settled by inter-village level or regional level caste council. In local
context the village caste council is known as ब्राह्मण Jāti Panchāyat, meaning village level caste council and the wider one is known as नाग Jāti Panchāyat. Here the eldest members from the ruling or priestly clan act as the heads of the council while the different lineage or clan elders are the members.

Kuruba caste is a localised group. In a settlement caste members while interacting, have property and socio-ritual disputes. This gives a scope for conflict in daily life. The family level disputes between father-son, husband-wife, brothers etc., are brought to the notice of the council and they are settled in a meeting. Similarly, quarrels between husband and wife about ill treatment, adultery, inter family disputes like property matters, violation of marriage agreements etc., are settled by the council.

The disputes which are outside the jurisdiction of the village caste council like those which involve two individuals or families from different villages, inter-caste disputes and violation of caste norms etc., are settled by the inter-village council. The caste council heads of village level under the jurisdiction, become members to it. Such a council usually meets only on request
by the disputants and by appealing to the head of the council. In turn, he will fix a day and place for the meeting and send words to other members and disputing parties. Usually the matter is discussed at length and a consensus agreement is brought about.

*Traditional Jural Organisation and Punishment*

In the past when caste councils had authority and power to settle disputes they even punished their members by imposing various punishments like fines and even imprisonment. Excommunication was also common. The disputes brought before the council varied from beating with footwear to cases of adultery. Violation of promises in matrimonial affairs, property matters, illtreatment of wife, parents, adoption of a son were a few to mention. The punishment given were also of traditional type - feeding the community, payment of fine to the caste council, excommunication etc. were also in use.

There are instances where severe punishments were given by the caste and village panchayats to the offenders. The traditional caste leaders had absolute powers and authority vested in them and would summon the culprits, both men and women, and punished them severely. Physical
punishments like beating, forced labour, carrying the load of stones for a specified period of time, were a few to mention. Sometimes the culprits were punished by burns on their hands or body. In case of proved adultery of a woman, she was stripped in public, her head and eye-brows shaved and her body painted with white and red mud in half and paraded in the settlement on a donkey. Drum music played for such a procession was the one which was normally played during a funeral procession. Later she was forced to leave the settlement. There are also instances where ladies punished in this way committed suicide.

Those who violated caste norms like eating forbidden food and drinking alcoholic beverages or having sex with a person belonging to much lower caste, were also punished severely. The punishments were hard and also costly like going on a pilgrimage to a shrine and to offer a costly worship there. Feeding the community members for a lavish feast was common. Sometimes they were made to pay a heavy fine and for which the family was forced to part with its gold or even landed property.

Another weapon used by the caste panchayats on the offenders was excommunication. Till the offender agreed for the demands of the Panchayat, the entire family
was "kept outside" and no one helped them even at times of crisis in the family. Even lending of water, fire and food to them was forbidden. The children and women folk were also isolated. Naturally the family group accepted whatever the demands the panchayat made though they were not normally agreeable to them.

During later years, when the caste panchayats became welfare bodies they began to levy heavy fines on the offenders. In a few villages the rates of fines for each offence were fixed. Sometimes the levying of fines was such the disputing husband and wife, son and father or brothers were fined for the quarrel they had. Though this seemed funny since the husband or the father as the head of the family, paid the fines levied on both, the caste panchayat went ahead with such punishments because it brought funds for welfare activities. Later these funds were used to construct the temple of the caste deity, to celebrate a fair or to give a feast etc. But no one dared to question the caste elders since they had the authority and power to do whatever they liked.

In a few villages, the traditional caste leaders misused not only their powers and authority but also the
public fund they had with them. As leaders they indulged in harassing their fellow weak members. They were also partial in settling disputes and levying fines. Many a times they themselves were culprits but were not brought under law. But no one dare raise these things since they were scared of the enormous powers and authority the traditional leaders had. The situation in the village under study shows that the caste council of the Kuruba was very powerful in the beginning. The headman of the Savantalaru clan being the ruling clan of the past, acted as their leader and different clan representatives selected for their age and wisdom, were the other members. Till recently, they did not allow any disputes to go before law courts or the police. Because the caste elders not only considered it an insult to do so but also they never wanted their caste people to waste their time and money in going to law courts for their disputes. But over the years the jurisdiction and authority of the caste council dwindled, and as the people became more and more aware of their rights, and privileges the caste councils became weaker. The state also took away some of their powers and authority.

Later during the primitive years of the backward caste movement the traditional leaders of the Kuruba caste were educated to play a decisive role in the development
matters. When caste conferences and meetings were held at state or district levels, the traditional leaders encouraged their caste members in the villages to attend them and to contribute money towards the expenses. When schools were established in villages they convinced their caste members to send their children to them. They also encouraged them to keep their children in hostels opened in various towns and cities. They also helped the caste association in implementing a few welfare programmes like discouraging child marriages, payment of bride price and dowry. They also helped in preventing the celebration of a few rites and rituals like offering of blood to the deities, dedication of girls as Devadasi, offering of alcohol to ancestors and guests at the time of celebrations.

When the country was declared independent, and adult franchise being adopted, the traditional leaders got a statutory position. At times of political action in villages or state, like elections to different offices, they advised their caste members to vote to a particular candidate. In the near past, the ordinary members of the community were only the tools in the hands of the upper or forward caste leaders and voted en masse to a candidate suggested by them. But gradually a change came where by people began to vote as per their own choice. Later when
their own caste members contested for elections they worked as a team. They also raised funds through contribution of money to help their caste members to fight elections in different constituencies. In this way the Kuruba have gained more and more political awareness. This is mainly due to the awakening brought about by the backward caste movement.

The Kuruba who were once a ruling caste gradually lost their hold on land and people with the dominance of Muslim rulers and later on the British. Those caste and sub-castes who were away from the state administration stayed away from politics. As a result of this two-fold i.e., the common man among the Kuruba become unconcerned with state politics. The ex-ruling groups opposed the state administration. In both cases till advent of India's Independence Movement and the Backward Caste Movement, they remained away from state politics.

Till the entry of Mahatma Gandhi into the Independence Movement in 1917, the Congress Party was a mere collection of western educated urban folks. But Gandhi's entrance into the struggle for independence made it a mass movement. All sections of people - farmers,
students, businessmen, plantation workers, factory workers and others got themselves involved in the struggle. The Congress leaders also utilized every possible opportunity they got to weaken the colonial government, along with this identification with the masses in fighting against socio-economic and political injustice. In most of the cases they mobilised the masses in such a way that they blamed the colonial government for all their problems.

From time to time the colonial government banned the activities of the Indian National Congress and also imprisoned its leaders. Similarly there was a ban on the political activities and gathering of the natives. As a result the congress leaders started a number of socio-cultural and religious organizations like schools, colleges, welfare agencies and used them as a cover. Even the festival celebrations like Ganesh Chaturdashi, Dasara festival were used for this purpose. Like many other groups the Kuruba caste organization too was used by the National Congress leaders for the political ends. They encouraged congress workers from these castes to organise a number of welfare agencies for the benefit of their caste members. Naturally these activities served as arena to train people against colonial rule and thereby for the democratic and self rule.
When the National Congress became very active and strong, things became difficult for the colonial government and the princes who supported it. Thus these two joined hands and brought out plans to weaken the independence movement. They studied the Congress organization carefully and found that the western educated high caste groups, especially the Brahmins were at the control of the situation. To break them the British used the divide and rule policy and encouraged the anti-Brahmin movement. They indirectly tried to suppress the institutions and persons who had ill feeling towards the exploiting upper castes. And they also introduced a number of programmes for the improvement of the conditions of the so called non-Brahmin or backward castes (c.f. Kavalekar, 1979:19-35).

And now added to this situation was, the availability of the western education, better job opportunities in government and other agencies and new political privileges was a happy feature to the low castes. Encouraged by this the socio-economically backward castes began to organise themselves. They also organised a number of socio-cultural activities and opened a number of schools, colleges and welfare agencies.
They were also encouraged to come out of the Congress Party and form their own regional and separate political parties. Among these the Justice Party, Forward Block, Muslim League, Dravida Khajagam etc., are important. All these regional parties had leaders coming from backward castes and they had difference of opinion about the policies and plans of the Congress and its approaches to independence, socio-economic development, political privileges to so-called low castes etc.

To fan the situation and to encourage the non-Brahmin movement the colonial government, undertook a number of steps. They appointed non-Brahmins especially those who had anti-Brahmin feelings, to strategic official positions in princely states such as Piwans and Ministers etc. These officials further helped the non-Brahmin movement by promising development and welfare activities among the non-Brahmin castes. As a result a number of caste associations were formed during this period. These organisations availed of free sites and government grants to construct association buildings, hostels and boarding homes to their caste students, in various towns and cities. These in turn served as meeting places of caste members to discuss anti-Brahmin strategies.
In line with this, the Kuruba of Karnataka got benefitted both by the Congress Movement as well as the non-Dalit Movement. As back as in 1916 the Kuruba of Bombay State convened a meeting of their caste to discuss about their problems. Later they met every year to discuss plans and programmes for the welfare of their community.

Similarly in the Princely State of Mysore, the Kurubara Sangha was started during 1921. The hostels for the community students were opened in various towns. To bring about changes in the values of the people and to make them to come out of their age old traditions and beliefs, a number of conferences were called and welfare institutions were formed. Among them Beeralingeshwara Sangha, Kalidas Mandira, Vijayanagara Sangha, Kalidasa Vidyavardhaka Sangha and so on are important. All these welfare agencies and gatherings helped to promote awareness among the community members and helped them to accept modern education and ideas.

In addition to it, these gatherings also helped in training and building up an army of community level political leaders. By organising local level conferences, hostels, and gatherings they not only established mass contact with their members but also gained the much needed