

Issues and Concerns of Billava Community : An Empirical Study with Reference to Dakshina Kannada

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Abstract

Billavas are numerically the largest community of undivided Dakshina Kannada and form nearly one - fifth of the total population. They are one among the socially, educationally and religiously down trodden communities and are considered to be the aborigines of Tulu Nadu. The Billavas are also known as 'baidya' and 'poojary'. The word 'baidya' means 'vaidya' or 'medicine man' and 'poojary' literally means 'worshipper' or 'priest'.

The paper aims at recording the historical facts that rendered the Billava community backward from time immemorial to recent times. It tries to analyze some of the major issues and concerns that have been bothering the community in different walks of life like social, economic, religious, cultural and political. Some of the issues like low social status of the billavas in society, their occupation status, status of the Billava women, Billava conversion to protestant religion and their political status have been discussed. It also seeks suggestions for solving the problems that have been hounding the Billava community since long. The role of Billava elite and community organizations in enhancing the status of Billava community is emphasized.

Keywords: *Billava Community, Conversions, Brahma Samaja*

Introduction

Billavas have been regarded as the aborigines of the coastal district of Karnataka, generally known as Tulunadu. Although they are numerically the largest community in Dakshina Kannada, they have remained backward socially, economically, politically and in all other walks of life. This appears to be very absurd. Historically, it is

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said that many Brahmin families came and settled down in Dakshina Kannada especially during the rule of the Kadambas of Banavasi. The Jains too made an advent and settled down in some parts of Dakshina Kannada. With the rise of Ikkeri Nayakas to power, veerashaivism began to be patronised by its rulers. Later, Dakshina Kannada saw the influx of Gowda Saraswaths from Goa and Rama Kshatriyas from the ghat regions during the tenure of Tipu Sultan. The Brahmins enjoyed religious supremacy in the Hindu Chaturvarna system. They imposed their Vedic culture on the indigenous people. Even the landed gentry like the Bunts and Jains made the Billavas their agricultural labourers and treated them like bonded slaves. Eventually, the original inhabitants of Tulunadu, especially the Billavas, who followed their own culture and religion were forced to leave their village and live in the out skirts as untouchables. This pathetic condition continued till the latter part of the 19th century when modern education introduced by the British provided an opportunity for the weaker sections including the Billavas to seek English education and enhance their status in society. Credit to the positive change must go to the socio-religious movements started by Shree Narayana Guru and the efforts of Jyothibha Phule, Mahatma Gandhi and Dr B.R. Ambedkar. In Dakshina Kannada, the role of Kudmul Ranga Rao and Karnad Sadashiva Rao in the upliftment of the downtrodden including the Billavas must be recognized. The Indian constitution also came to the rescue of the weaker sections of the society including the Billavas by upholding the principles of equality and social justice. The various social legislations passed in the parliament to end the practice of untouchability has also helped all the weaker sections of the society to rise up the social ladder.

Today, even though a small section of the Billavas have emerged as elites, a big chunk of them have still remained backward. The core concern of this paper is to recognize the causes of backwardness of the Billavas and to suggest certain solutions to elevate their position in the society.

Objectives

- To trace the profile of Dakshina Kannada and Billavas.
- To trace the historical facts that tell the tale of backwardness of Billavas from time immemorial to 1947 – the year of independence.
- To find out the reasons for the backwardness of Billavas in certain fields even during the post-independence era.
- To list out the findings to suggest solutions and arrive at a conclusion.

Profile of Dakshina Kannada

In order to have a proper understanding of the issues and concerns of Billavas of Dakshina Kannada, a brief history of Dakshina Kannada district needs to be understood. Dakshina Kannada occupies the Western Coastal strip of Karnataka, bounded by the Arabian sea on the West and lush green Western Ghats on the East and has held an important position in the history of South India since ancient times. Dakshina Kannada today covers an area of 4560 Sq. Kms and includes five taluks, viz., Mangalore, Bantwal, Belthangady, Puttur and Sullia (Addoor Krishna Rao 2007 :7). The people who first settled here are called the Tuluvas. The Billavas, Mogers and Bunts are the major communities of the Tuluva ethnic group. Other Tuluvas are Brahmins, Holeyas, Mahars, Koragas, Muslims, Jains and Mangalorean Catholics. Dakshina Kannada is also a land with unique cultural traditions and rituals wherein people are associated with religious and cultural traditions like Naga worship, Bhuta worship, Kambala, Yakshagana, Cock fight to name a few.

Profile of Billavas of Dakshina Kannada

The Billavas, the Mogers, the Nadavas, the Brahmins and the Jains have played a vital role in the evolution of social and cultural life of Tulunadu (Bhatt, 1975 : 226). The Billavas are numerically the largest community of undivided Dakshina Kannada and form nearly one fifth of the total population and hence were the dominant caste (Thurston, 1909 :243-44).

Peter J Clauss (1989:272) has cited that the Billavas or toddy tappers are the influential caste of Dakshina Kannada. They are the people who extract toddy from the palm trees. J. Sturrock (1894 : 171-72) has stated that the word Billava is a contraction of the word 'Billinavaru' meaning 'bowmen' and that the Billavas were employed as soldiers by the native rulers of the district and occupied a lower position in the caste hierarchy.

The Billavas are also called as 'baidya' and 'poojary'. The word 'baidya' means 'vaidya' or 'medicine man'. It is said that the Billavas were good practitioners of native medicine or physicians (Ibid :172). The word 'poojari' literally means 'worshipper' or 'priest'. In Tulunadu, the Poojarys have a very important role in 'nema' and 'bhuta kola' which is the worship of demi Gods, a practice seen among the backward communities of Dakshina Kannada (Bhatt , 1975 :227)

Historical facts related to backwardness of Billavas.

The Herur epigraphy of A.D. 1444 mentions 'Billa- Biruva' which means that the chief work of Billavas was with the bow. Thus Billavas who were bowmen occupied an important part in the army of the rulers of the region in the early times.

In Tulunadu, during the reign of Jain Kings, the Billavas were chief ministers, commanders and loyal right hand men. As Jaina rule collapsed, even the glorious life of the Billavas began to degenerate. In the later stage of history, the Billavas seem to have engaged mostly in agriculture. The Brahmins, Bunts and Jains who dominated in the field of agriculture pushed the Billavas to the position of tenants. Therefore, inspite of their numerical strength, the Billavas were economically and politically one of the weakest communities in Dakshina Kannada. They were mostly tenants or marginal and landless labourers working for the landed gentry like the Bunts or the people of the higher castes. It can be said that the Billavas formed the mass of the proletariat of Dakshina Kannada (Shri, 1985 : 179)

Likewise, since agriculture was their important occupation, they had to face a lot of difficulties and hardships mainly due to the vagaries of nature. Hence, most of them led a life of poverty. They could not

afford even one square meal. July to October was a difficult period during monsoon. Food shortage left them to contend with what was available; whatever was grown, more than half of the produce was to be given to the landlord. Heidrum Bruckner (2009 :5) describes the Billavas of the 19th Century as small tenant farmers and agricultural labourers working for Bunt Land owners.

Although agriculture was the basic occupation of the Billava, toddy tapping was their subsidiary occupation. It is said that the Billavas had a stronger urge for alcohol, perhaps partly because of their former soldier's profession. Therefore, when they became farmers, they started to draw toddy out of coconut and palm trees and later on engaged in distillation and liquor sales. Thus, a considerable number of Billavas became toddy tappers (Murthedara) for their livelihood (Shiri, 1985 : 179-80). Much risk is involved in this occupation of extracting toddy from the palm trees. Moreover, this occupation tempted them to be addicted to toddy.

This apart, in the field of religion also the Billavas were marginalized by the upper caste Hindus. The Brahmins enjoyed religious supremacy in the Hindu chaturvarna system. The Billavas who followed their own culture and modes of worship were forced to leave their villages and live in the outskirts as untouchables. They were denied admission to the temples of the higher castes. When the Billavas wished to make offerings to the deities, they had to hand over the offerings to the Bunts, who in turn passed them on to the Brahmin priests. Moreover, the Billavas were not allowed to approach even the periphery of these temples and were declared impure. However, they had the freedom to build temples of their own if they chose. But, under no circumstances could they install in those temples the same deities worshipped by the high castes. When true worship of God was made impossible, the mode of worship began to deteriorate. There was a growing tendency to worship ghosts and ghouls. Superstitious and antiquated customs took deep roots. The lavish spending and jollifications in the name of religious celebrations, social ceremonies like marriage, etc landed most of the Billava families in financial bankruptcy. From the point of view of

education, social, economic and cultural standards, the Billavas have remained totally backward as opportunities were denied to them and were subject to exploitation by the dominant castes. Hence in all fields of life, the Billavas were marginalized. Historical documents provide plenty of evidences to prove the reasons for the pathetic condition of the Billavas in the past till recent times.

Billava conversions

The Billavas in order to liberate themselves from the shackles of bondage, oppression and exploitation from the hands of upper caste Hindus converted in large numbers to protestant religion that promised them dignity of life and with opportunities to enhance their status in society. The tide of conversion of Billavas to protestant religion began with the arrival of Basel missionaries to Mangalore on 30th October 1834.

The prominent causes for Billava conversions are as follows:-

- 1 The Billavas were regarded as untouchables.
2. Major proportion of the Billavas were illiterates.
3. The deplorable social conditions in which the Billavas lived and from which they increasingly wanted to be liberated.
4. Temple entry was denied to the Billavas and were religiously discriminated.
5. Billavas were deprived opportunities in social, economic, political and other spheres of life. Even civic amenities were denied to them.
6. Ill treatment and exploitation by the upper caste hindus.
7. To escape the vexation of unappeased demi-Gods during demon worship.
- 8 To overcome the oppression by greedy landlord.
- 9 Extreme poverty.
- 10 Employment opportunities provided by the missionaries for the local people, both men and women in the tile factories , weaving mills, press and workshops set up by them.

Although conversion appears to be a solution to all the problems of Billavas, in reality, it was not. At this juncture of history, Brahma Samaj appeared on the scene in April 1870 to exercise a constraint on the missionary activities in Dakshina Kannada. Unfortunately, the Brahma Samaj failed to find any significant followers among the Billavas who were mostly uneducated or of little education (Narayana, 1983 : 30-31)

At this point of history, emergence of Shree Narayana Guru as a socio- religious leader of Billava Community played a very significant role. In 1912, Shree Narayana Guru consecrated the temple at Kudroli with the installation of the sacred Shiva Linga brought by him and named it as GokarnanathaKshetra. He advocated that all Gods creation had the right to worship the Almighty and preached that people regardless of caste and creed, should worship one divine force which is known by different names. He also asked the community leaders to work together for the progress of the community by establishing schools and industrial establishments.

All the above historical facts starting from time immemorial till the advent of Shree Narayana Guru, show how the Billava community progressed from utter misery to the status of self help, self improvement and self esteem.

The March of Billavas towards progress after independence

The process of change and mobility in the Billava community started with the emergence of 20th century. Various forces and factors have contributed to it. The message 'One caste, one religion, one God for man, educate to free, organize to be strong, of Shree Narayana Guru had a profound influence on the emerging leaders of the Billava community. The introduction of English Education by the British, social legislations and constitutional reforms, Mahatma Gandhi's fight against untouchability, the leadership provided by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to the dalit movement, sincere efforts made by local reformers like Kudmul Ranga Rao and Karnad Sadashiva Rao have really contributed towards the upliftment of the Billavas. The Land

Reforms Act implemented by Sri Devaraj Urs enabled the Billavas to be the owners of their land. Today, many Billavas have received higher education and have entered modern professions like medicine, engineering, legal, teaching, business, service and thereby attained the position of elites in society. Thus, the illiterate toddy tappers and agricultural labourers have really climbed up the ladder of success in the rigid stratified society of the Hindus in Dakshina Kannada.

Issues and concerns

In Dakshina Kannada, the Billavas drew inspiration from the message of Shree Narayana Guru-'educate to be free, organize to be strong' and began towards realization of the goal of organizing the Billava community by establishing Billava organizations like Billava union, Shree Venkatesha Shiva Bhakthi Yoga Sangha, Yuva Vahini, Shree Narayana Guru Vedike, Rashtriya Billavara Mahamandala and All India Billava Unification Committee. These organizations have been striving towards the welfare of the community, but have not succeeded in fulfilling the aspirations of the Billava Community. In other parts of Karnataka, Communities like the Lingayats and Vokkaligas have their own organizations and Mutts that play a vital role in the noble task of spreading education by running a chain of educational institutions like primary, secondary, high schools, colleges, medical, engineering and technical institutions. As a contrast, even though Billavas are in majority and considered to be the original natives of the land, due to the lack of proper organizational unity and leadership, they have failed to cater to the educational needs of the community inspite of many philanthropists and elites, being overwhelmingly ready to contribute to the cause of education. Since education alone can provide the Billavas a firm anchor for selecting modern occupational roles thereby facilitating rise to that station in life which has been denied to them, measures for helping the Billava boys and girls in education must be most extensively undertaken. Attempts to alleviate the status of Billava women, especially their level of education need to be given proper emphasis because the education of a girl has a more lasting impact on society than that of a boy.

Economically, the Billavas have remained backward and poor. Years of exploitation and failure of the present government machinery to fully protect the Billavas from the onslaughts of the upper castes struggling hard to cling to their diminishing power keeps the Billavas in a state of inertia. The economically depressed among them still find themselves highly dependent on the affluent upper castes. In addition to this dependence, the weaker sections of the Billava community do not find their numerical strength strong enough to match economically and socially powerful upper caste manoeuvres. In this regard, the efforts of the elites have not been quite successful in wiping out the feeling of insecurity etched in the minds of the poor Billavas.

Barring a few exceptions, in most of the cases, the majority of the affluent Billavas are not in any way concerned with the problems of their community. Those who have risen in status, in most cases do not take interest in the measures for the upliftment of their brethren lying at the lowest rung of the society. Such individualistic and apathetic attitudes against their community nurtured by the affluent Billavas to a great extent appear to be an important reason for the slow pace of social and economic transformation of the Billava Community as a whole. However, most of the Billavas have given up their traditional caste based occupations. Diversification of occupation has taken them away from the rural moorings and provided a chance to break away from their unhappy past. The new sources of livelihood have enabled them to enter the middle class income groups at various levels. Shree Narayana Guru had emphasized on the establishment of economic institutions and industry for the economic amelioration of the community. Although some economic and financial institutions like banks have been established they have not flourished to the level of expectation. In spite of having a long history, the number of branches are limited. The growth in the number of financial and economic institutions could certainly have provided job opportunities to many unemployed youth of Billava Community.

Before independence, politics was reserved for a few upper castes in society. After independence, achieving political position at different

levels has become possible for all citizens of India. Even backward classes have become politically powerful because of political awareness. In the past, there was not sufficient political representation of Billavas in the state and national politics. In order to gain political representation to the Billavas, a historical convention of Billavas was organised at Mulki on 23rd May 1976. As a result of this, Billava community got one representation to the Lok Sabha and six representation to the state Vidhana Sabha. Sri B. Janardhan Poojary was elected from Lok Sabha constituency as the member of Parliament. Then, he became the Union Minister of State for finance from 1982-87. At present more men and women of the Billava community are involved in the field of regional politics. But it is disheartening to note that the number of Billava representatives in Lok Sabha and Vidhana Sabha is dwindling. It is highly conspicuous that not even a single Billava lady candidate has represented the community in the Lok Sabha and Vidhana Sabha. This is really a political challenge to Billava women politicians. Billava women need to play a significant role in regional, state and national politics. Although political participation of Billavas has increased of late due to political awareness, proportionate representation needs to be provided to Billava community taking into consideration the size of Billava population in the district. Yet, the participation of the Billava masses in the political process is minimal.

Coming to the political future of the Billavas, the leaders should discover that they must take advantage of their vast numbers in political terms. They can take advantage by extracting favours for their own community. But, in actual practice, the Billava leaders have not extracted the price for their affiliation from the political parties.

Quite aware of the low economic position and the inherent weakness of the Billavas, safe guarding the economic interest and reform of their life style is a matter of deep concern. Even today, majority of the Billavas have been continuing their traditional occupation of toddy tapping inspite of diversification of occupation. Much risk is involved in this occupation. While climbing the palm tree, at any moment the tapper may fall down and suffer a fatal injury. He may

either die or fracture his spinal cord, making him literally crippled for life. This is one of the major issues and concerns of the Billavas engaged in toddy tapping. Therefore, proper safety measures must be provided to them. Their health and life should be insured, modern gadgets must be provided to them, so that the risk of slipping and falling down from the palm tree can be overcome. In this regard, the government should take necessary measures to safeguard the economic interests of the toddy tappers and reform their life style.

- Toddy should be recognized as vitaminised juice and should be called 'Sweet Juice' or 'Neera'. Government should take initiative to popularize Neera.
- Palm and date trees should be declared national property.
- Drinking of toddy should not be prohibited.
- Booths for the sale of toddy should be established by the government at various places.
- If possible, the government should nationalize this profession.
- Efforts should be made to plant more palm trees.
- Taxes on toddy should be reduced.
- Toddy tappers should be provided all help by the government and the prestige of the profession should be raised and empowered.

In spite of the numerical strength of the Billavas in Dakshina Kannada, they are even today considered as untouchables by the higher castes. The case of Airodi Govindappa, a famous Yakshagana artist is a live example of this pathetic condition of the Billavas even today. This is really a matter of great concern regarding the status attributed to the Billavas even today.

This apart, the youths of Billava community have become an easy prey to social evils of modernity. Anti-social elements are using them for their own selfish ends. They do not have proper role models. In the name of fashion and modernity, values are declining among the youth. Proper orientation and guidance is the need of the hour.

With the passage of time, many Billavas have received good education and have succeeded in all walks of life. There are

outstanding doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers and Billavas have also excelled in the field of literature, sports, fine arts, social service, etc. Unfortunately the proportion of Billavas in the field of administrative services namely IAS, KAS, IFS, IPS is minimal. Had they entered the field, they could turn out to be the most active and powerful agents of social transformation. As effective carriers of modern social stimuli and communicators of new ideas, they are in a position to prepare the minds of the Billava masses for changes in a particular direction. As a link between masses and centres of power, they can on the one hand guide the masses in embracing some of the implications of change and on the other hand, force the policy makers in setting the strategy and pace of social transformation. As a reference model to the masses, they can significantly affect the attitudinal dimensions as well as the behavioural propensity of the masses of the community.

Besides, the position of women among the Billava community is improving at a very slow pace. The status of women is still extremely low. Even today, many of the women are confined to the four walls of their house. A strange situation that persists is that women are exploited by women themselves. There are some cases of mothers-in-law considering their daughters-in-law as secondary members of the family. There is no equal status for the daughters-in-law in some of the cases. This attitude of Billava women should change by liberating them from the constraints of family life and home making and providing them opportunities to mingle with the society at large. The fact that they contribute to family income does not have any bearing on their status in the house. Similarly, divorce and widow remarriage was not easy for Billava women in the past. Today, they are on the increase. But most of the Billavas do not favour divorce and are ambivalent towards widow remarriage. Mr. Janardhana Poojary has introduced measures to improve the status of widows in order to bring them to the forefront of society. As a matter of fact, the position of women is the index of social progress of any community. Hence, Billava community can progress and develop only when its women are empowered in the real sense. The Billavas, in order to elevate

their status in traditional stratification system, have tried to organize themselves through unions, pressure groups, caste organizations and community federations. Under the charismatic leadership of socio-religious leader Shree Narayana Guru, a highly organized association of Billavas came into existence. The important facets of the activities of Shree Narayana Guru had been firstly to organize for the Billavas just those Hindu Institutions to which they were denied access by the Higher castes and the second was to weld the scattered Billavas into a strong caste union so that such a union would give them strength for collective effort in the field of education, social reform and political action. Apart from this, protection of the interest of the caste members, fight against evil customs and other factors have given rise to the emergence of caste / community associations. Today, these associations have no unity among them. If at all the community has to benefit from these associations, its leadership has to change. Leaders should not be selected on feudal principles, but be elected on the basis of democratic procedure. Such leaders should work among the masses of the community. They have to make the Billavas conscious of their own rights and see that they utilize to the full the opportunities and advantages given to them by the constitution. All the leaders and associations should forget their petty differences and strive to foster community solidarity because only by a united stand as a community can they act as a pressure group, gain political rights and improve their economic condition. Hence, all associations should unite under a federal organization.

Conclusion

In the light of the above discussion it is found out that the Billavas are the aborigines of Dakshina Kannada District. They numerically formed the largest chunk of the society. Even though they were backward in the past, they have come forward in all walks of life at present. Many elites have emerged in different fields of activity, their capacities and skills have proved excellent and gained recognition and awards for their significant contribution to the community and society. In spite of all this progress, the position of Billavas in society is quite deplorable.

The elites being educated and comparatively more enlightened than the rest of the community are better equipped to perceive social change and take better advantage of the various concessions and ameliorative measures taken by the government for them. They are also better able to articulate their feelings and formulate their views, aspirations, demands and grievances. In this regard, the Billava elites are required to shoulder greater responsibility for the affairs and progress of their community considering the fact that such elites are very few in number.

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