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Placing North Karnataka - An Essay by Amaresh Nugadoni, Seminar (Special Issue: Karnataka Vignettes)

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DO people in the southern part of Karnataka even know the names of North Karnataka districts like Bidar, Gulbarga, Bijapur, Bagalkote, Gadag, Koppala and Bellary? And if they do, what might be the reasons for it? The government officials remember Bellary and Bijapur with fear, terrified of being transferred to these districts as punishment for lapses in official work. Twenty years ago, Bellary was famous for its jail. Now it represents mining, and any mention of the mining lords invariably brings a few individuals to mind. Bellary today represents a district that can shake the government. Its iron ore stuffed land, hills and mountains probably appear like a heap of money in the fantasy of industrialists.

School and college going students hear the names of a few districts from North Karnataka every year: Bidar, Bijapur, and Raichur fare the worst in the SSLC and PUC exam results reported in the newspapers. The students in Chincholi taluk, which was represented by Veerendra Patil during his tenure as chief minister, and in Yadgiri taluk (now district), where Mallikarjun Kharge has continuously

* Translated from the Kannada original by Chandan Gowda.

1. The region of North Karnataka is a composite of the districts that were distributed across the Bombay presidency (Belgaum, Dharwar and North Kanara), Madras Presidency (Bellary) and Hyderabad-Karnataka (Bidar, Gulbarga, Bijapur, Bagalkote, Gadag, and Koppala) before independence. This article focuses on the experiences of Hyderabad-Karnataka.

2. SSLC (Secondary School Leaving Certificate) and PUC (Pre-University Course) exams are state government administered exams that are equivalent to the 10th and 12th grades respectively.
In the Hyderabad-Karnataka region, religious (dharmika) power has more sway over communities than political power. The vacanakaras had persuaded the communities to set aside their unquestioning regard for the king. Instead, reverence for the sadhaka (spiritual seeker) was inculcated in these communities. Nobody offered to build a memorial for a deceased king. If any of the Sharanas, Dasas, Anubhaavis, Siddhas, Aaroodas, Sufis, Fakirs and Dervishes died, however, memorials were built for them at community initiatives. Many explanations may be advanced for this outstanding cultural feature, but the inability of the major religions to earn the trust of all the communities in this region is perhaps the chief among them.

At a time when only gifted persons were considered capable of writing literature, those from the lowest social castes astonished everyone with their vacanas. Although the 12th century cultural revolt led by the Sharanas brought about major social transformations, a narrowing of vision was evident after its institutionalization as Veerashaiva or Lingayat religion. Their mathas and temples enabled the Vaidikas and the upper castes among the Lingayats to lead sequestered social lives. Numerous lower ranked communities were unable to make space for differing conceptions of God and religion in the newly institutionalized Lingayat religion. In order to overcome this void, they formed small, spiritually like-minded groups and panthas in their own areas, venerating local sadhakas. After the vacanakaras, Islam, Sufism and Dervishes have greatly influenced the communities in Bijapur, Gulbarga, Raichur and Bidar districts. During the Bahmani rule, many Islamic scholars, poets, religious figures, Sufis, artisans and traders had moved here.

As a consequence of their Anubhaavi powers, the Anubhaavis, Aaroodas, Sufis and Fakirs came to wield tremendous influence on the small-sized lower communities. Their burial sites flourished and became centres of worship for the socially lower ranked communities among non-Muslims. People also gathered here to share their joys and sorrows. Tattvapadas acquired social prevalence through bhajan congregations.

These communities find fulfilment through singing and dancing during Moharram. Interestingly, more than three-fourths of the people participating in this Muslim festival are non-Muslims. Many villages, which don’t have any Muslim residents, also celebrate Moharram grandly. During the Moharram celebrations in Kudaremothi, Koppala district, festival participants from outside can seek hospitality in anyone’s house. Many tribals regularly visit this village during the festival.

The mantra, ‘Ek Lakh Aimcee Hazaar Pancho Pir Paigambar Mounuddin Kashi Pathi Gangadhara Harahara Mahadeva’, is uttered at the Moune-shwara temple in Thintani. Many different communities participate in the Urs celebrations. Barring the communal activities that were organized by the Razakars during the Hyderabad-Karnataka freedom struggle in 1948, this region has not experienced inter-religious violence. However, caste boundaries have remained rigid.

The economy of the taluks and districts of North Karnataka remains in poor shape. Nothing much has happened since the establishment of the Hyderabad-Karnataka Development Board a couple of decades earlier. Available data clearly establish the state government’s discriminatory attitude towards this region. But efforts to bring pressure on the government are missing. It is as if the politicians from these regions do not have any meaningful existence. Indeed, their demand for a separate state almost makes them look comical.

In the past, huge tracts of land were owned by the upper castes as land reforms were not properly implemented here. Small farmers owned between 100 to 500 acres. Landlords, mostly Lingayats and Brahmmins, on average owned between 1000 to 2000 acres of land. The lower castes did not own any land. Therefore, extreme affluence and extreme poverty have been the chief features of this region. It must be noted that women, especially those of the labouring classes, have helped families cope with life. Their determination to nourish their families features prominently in the literature from this region.

The poor managed their daily hunger through meagre earnings from labour. They mostly worked for the landlords. It was not until 1980 that these labouring classes, finding it difficult to manage local conditions,

3. Vacanakaras: the Veerashaiva saint-composers’ vacanas (free verse) poems between the 10th and 12th centuries which saw Veerashaivism flourish in Karnataka.

4. Women, who were a prominent in the 12th century struggle led by the vacanakaras, disappeared soon afterwards. They do not figure among the composers of dasa sahiya and the tattvapada. Prominent figures in the 15th century dasa sahiya include Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa. The vast body of tattvapadas was composed between the 15th and 19th centuries.

5. Anubhaavi: a complex philosophical term used here to refer to those who have had a profound spiritual experience.

6. The Razakars: militia wing of Majlis Ittehad-ul-Muslimin, a political outfit authorized by the Nizam of Hyderabad, which tried to suppress local support for Hyderabad’s accession to the newly formed Indian Union.
started to migrate. As a consequence, children of migrating families do not attend school. People from Gadag, Koppal, Bellary, Bijapur, Bagalkot, Gulbarga, Raichur and Bidar regularly migrate to Mumbai, Pune, Kolhapur, Solapur, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Mangalore and Mercara. As a result, some of the villages have been totally deserted. A fleet of lorries, tractors, jeeps and vans operate to transport migrant labour to these cities.

A spate of farmer deaths has occurred. Over two-thirds of the children in this region do not go to school. Lakhs of people from the labouring classes have migrated to cities in search of employment. When the recent unforeseen floods hit those who had stayed behind, a caring government was missing. Yet, it is rare to find people from this region organize a meeting or a workshop to discuss these matters. The intellectuals keep to themselves. It is curious that no political leaders other than Veerendra Patil, Mallikarjuna Kharge and Dharam Singh have emerged in the politics of Hyderabad-Karnataka. Most local politicians remain nominal figures who disappear after serving as a legislator or minister for a term or two. Leaders responsive to common aspirations are a rarity.

The infamous Bellary mining lords, who have become ministers, cannot really be called politicians in any meaningful sense of the term. They have turned people’s power (praja shakti) into a sale item and bought their way into the portals of power through elections, in the process further destroying the sanctity of state politics. Nobody can launch a struggle for nationalizing the mines in the present situation. The roads in Bellary are difficult to traverse even for short distances – the dust from mining has covered them. Mining in these areas has badly damaged agriculture. No sooner do the saplings emerge, regardless of the crop, the mining dust covers them over. The roads in the towns, which are watered during the day to keep the dust from spreading, are slushy all the time. Villagers suffer the constant noise of dynamite explosions and traffic. Lorries and jeeps roam the hills like cattle, birds and forest animals. The dust has deformed even the towns of Bellary and Hospet. Mining is doing irreparable damage to humans, animals and crops.

People in Gulbarga traditionally survived through dry farming. Today, the mining of the raw material for making cement has drowned Shahabad, Sedam and Thandur in cement dust. The cement industrialists have amassed fortunes, while at the same time they have also contributed to the collapse of local life-standards. The only difference is that unlike the Bellary mining lords, they haven’t joined politics and ruined the state – so far.

Of course, widespread poverty does not only imply suffering and grief. Fairs continue to be a time for celebration throughout the many districts of North Karnataka. Even two decades ago, some of these fairs lasted for a month. In recent times, however, even the biggest fairs don’t last more than ten days. Lakhs of people attend the fairs that are held in Mylara, Hampi, Hulagi, Koppala, Kukanooru, Kanakagiri, Neeramaanvi, Kalamaali, Kavithaala, Amarendra, Kodekallu, Thinthani, Humnabad and numerous other places. These fairs have become major trading centres where goods ranging from oxen to hairpins are sold. A few fairs are even known by the goods sold there. The villagers in this region make a trip to their favourite fairs along with their families.

‘Karikas’ or ‘Helike’ (sayings) are another special feature of the fairs. The Mylaralingeswara fair is especially famous in this regard. About five lakh people listen closely to a brief cryptic utterance by a Gorava priest, who is seen as a divine representative, at a specific time on the last day of the fair. He loudly utters the Karikas from atop a forty feet tall wooden pillar and jumps below. ‘The newborn baby will find happiness, Parakh!’, ‘The heap of pearls is round, Parakh!’ and ‘A stone was hurled at the sky, Parakh!’ are a few that have been heard here. Merchants, farmers, and individuals from various other occupations read their own meanings into these utterances, using them as guides to action in various life situations through the following year, in particular, their future calculations about matters like rainfall, trade, and marriage. The fairs are testimony to the creativity of these communities.

Only research can ascertain the immense variety of art that once flourished in North Karnataka. A large variety of artist troupes performed daily in village after village. They could be seen performing at people’s doorsteps from early morning itself. The sound (nada) of the tamburi ceased only at sunset. It is well-known how British laws harassed performing artists, treating them as beggars. Nevertheless, these artists were active for about a quarter century after independence, but the forces of modernity have rendered them marginal since. They have set aside art and are occupied with petty trades, such as selling plastic goods, to survive.

7. Goravas belong to the Kuruba caste and are followers of Lord Mylaralingeshwara (an avatar of Shiva).
8. Gondaligas, Hagaluvshagaaras, Jatigeras, Budabudakes, Tattvapada singers and Dasapada singers, to name a few.