

CHAPTER XLIII.

The people of Mysore in the early part of the 19th century.

The Mysoreans were reckoned a healthy, stout race of men and rather above the size of the Indians on the coast of Coromandal. Most of them lived on ragi as at present and an individual was allowed one seer of flour at a meal and two meals were usually taken each day. As in other parts of India, in Mysore also there were various castes and occupations and some of the occupations were peculiar to particular castes. Among the Mussalmans there was much variety and many of them were soldiers by profession and when out of employment they are said to have idled their time rather than follow any other occupation. A few of them however were engaged in easy handicrafts or attempted at a little trade but they carefully avoided everything that required much bodily exertion. The population in several parts of the State was very low especially in the northern parts.

Higher learning was limited mostly to Brahmins, but the generality of people who learnt anything were content with a little common arithmetic, reading and writing. Dramas relating mostly to episodes in the Ramayana and Mahabharata were acted and these lasted at a time for seven or eight nights beginning generally at 7 in the evening and continuing till daylight. The female parts were always acted by boys, some of whom performed their parts with so much skill that it was difficult to realise that they were not of the female sex. In every drama a buffoon was introduced and no class of people, not even the ministers of State, were spared from the sarcasms of this actor.

In this period quarrels between people of various castes among the Hindus were very frequent, especially the castes coming under the general designations of Yedagai or left-hand and Balagai or right-hand. The castes comprehended in the left-hand faction were generally Panchalas, Devangas, Hegganigars, Bedars, Madigaru and a few others. To the right-hand faction mostly belonged Banajigas, Vokkaligars, Jotiphana, Rungare, Ladaru, Kurubars,

Agasas, Bestas, Naindas, Upars and Holiars. The different castes of which each faction was composed were not united by any common tie of religion, occupation or kindred, and it was more or less based on a struggle for honorary distinctions. The Brahmins and several other classes remained neutral and took no part in these quarrels and sometimes acted as arbiters in the differences which the two factions had to settle between themselves. When one faction trespassed on what was regarded as the rights of the other, tumults arose and sometimes spread over large tracts affording facilities for excesses of every kind and generally ending in bloody conflicts. Abbe Dubois a French missionary attached to the Pondicherry Catholic mission and who frequently travelled in Mysore adopting the dress and mode of life of a Hindu Sanyasin and whose experience extended to a period of 30 years has made the following observations on these quarrels between the right and left-hand factions in his book known as 'Hindu Manners and Customs.' "I have several times witnessed instances of these popular insurrections excited by the mutual pretensions of the two factions and pushed to such an extreme of fury that the presence of a military force has been insufficient to quell them to allay the clamour or to control the excesses in which the contending factions consider themselves entitled to indulge. Occasionally when the magistrates fail to effect a reconciliation by peaceful means it is necessary to resort to force in order to suppress the disturbances. I have sometimes seen these rioters stand up against several discharges of artillery without exhibiting any sign of submission and when at last the armed force has succeeded in restoring order, it is only for a time. At the very first opportunity the rioters are at work again regardless of the punishment they have received and quite ready to renew the conflict as obstinately as before. The rights and privileges for which the Hindus are ready to fight such sanguinary battles appear highly ridiculous. Perhaps the sole cause of the contest is the right to wear slippers or to ride through the streets in a palanquin or on horseback during marriage festivals, sometimes it is the privilege of being escorted on certain occasions by armed retainers, sometimes that of having a trumpet sounded in front of a procession or of being accompanied by native musicians

at public ceremonies. Perhaps it is simply the particular kind of musical instrument suitable to such occasions that is in dispute or it may be the right of carrying flags of certain colours or certain devices during these ceremonies."

The Koramars or Kalla Bhantas were professional thieves and Abbe Dubois' description of them is interesting if for nothing else, at least for the sake of such people having become rare at present. "These people make a study of the art of stealing and all the dodges of their infamous profession are instilled into them from their youth. To this end their parents teach them to lie obstinately and train them to suffer torture rather than divulge what it is to their interest to hide. Far from being ashamed of their profession the Kalla Bhantas glory in it and when they have nothing to fear, they take the greatest pleasure in boasting of the clever thefts they have committed in various places. Those who caught in the act have been badly hurt or who have been deprived by the magistrates of nose, ears or right-hand show their scars and mutilations with pride as proofs of their courage and intrepidity and these men are usually the chosen heads of their caste. They always commit their depredations at night. Noiselessly entering a village they place sentinels along the different roads, while they select the houses that can be entered into with the least risk. These they creep into and in a few minutes strip them of all the metal vessels and other valuables they can find, including the gold and silver ornaments which the sleeping women and children wear round their necks. They never break open the doors of the houses, for that would make too much noise and so lead to their detection. Their plan is to pierce the mud walls of the house with a sharp iron instrument specially made for the purpose with which they can in a few moments easily make a hole large enough for a man to creep through. They are so clever that they generally manage to carry out their depredations without being either seen or heard by anybody. But if they happen to be surprised, the Kalla Bhantas show desperate resistance and do their best to escape. If one of their number is killed in the scrimmage, they will run any risk to obtain possession of the corpse. They then cut off the head and carry it away with them to avoid discovery.

“Tippu who governed Mysore had a regular regiment of Kalla Bhantas in his service attached to his troops whom he employed, not to fight but to despoil the enemy's camp during the night, to steal their horses, to carry off any valuables they could find among the officers' baggage, to spike the enemy's guns and to act as spies. They were paid according to their skill and success. In times of peace they were sent into neighbouring states to pilfer on their own account and also to report on the proceedings of the rulers. The minor native chiefs called Palegars always employed a number of these ruffians for the same purposes.

“In the provinces where these Kalla Bhantas are countenanced by Government the unfortunate inhabitants have no other means of protecting themselves from their depredations than by making an agreement with the head of the gang to pay him an annual tax of a quarter of a rupee and a fowl per house, in consideration of which he becomes responsible for all the thefts committed by his people in villages which are thus, so to say, are insured.”

Among Hindus marriage had a stronger hold on their minds in the beginning of the 19th century than at present. An unmarried man was looked upon as almost a useless member of society. He was not consulted on any important subject and no work of any consequence was given to him. A Hindu who became a widower was looked upon in the same manner and he was forced therefore to speedily re-marry.

The ideal for a woman was to know how to cook, pound rice and to give birth to children. The rank of a caste was determined by the prohibition of widow marriages.

The horrid custom of Sahagamana or Suttee as it was commonly called, though it had become rare in the peninsular part of India still existed* and there was no legal prohibition for a widow to burn herself with her husband if she was willing to do so.

* To Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Lord William Bentinck we owe the absolute prohibition of this barbarous and inhuman custom at a later period. To realise what a blessing this legal prohibition has conferred on the women of

Abbe Dubois bears ample testimony to the general poverty of the people of the country intensified as it was by the frequency of wars and the consequent havoc wrought by such wars. His observations on the classes among whom poverty mostly prevailed go to show that almost half the population were possessed of little property and lived from hand to mouth. Among the rest, barring a small minority the others could lay no claim to any kind of affluence and could only be regarded as being able to keep off starvation when any calamity overtook the country. In Abbe Dubois' eyes, India was not at all the land which flowed, as traditionally believed, with milk and honey and where the soil yielded all that was necessary for the existence of its happy people almost without cultivation.

More than half the population could not boast of property worth even Rs. 50. In this class came mostly the Panchamas, a considerable portion of the Vokkaligars and multitudes of vagrants and beggars. Most of the people belonging to these classes hired themselves out as agricultural or other labourers and are said to have been required to do the hardest work for the smallest wage. Some of the younger members of this class hired themselves out without wages on condition that after they worked faithfully for seven or eight years their masters were to bear the cost of their marriage. As soon as the children born of such marriages reached the age of eight or nine, they joined the same master who employed their father, the boys looking after the cattle and the girls cleaning the house, grinding the corn and doing other kinds of domestic work. Some of the members of this class who worked on their own account were carriers and coolies or casual agricultural labourers. When the wage was paid in money, it varied from 9 pies to one and a half anna a day. Such people owned a habitation which consisted of a wretched hut twelve or fifteen feet long, five or six broad and from four to five feet high, often full of

India, a case of Suttee actually witnessed by Dubois is given in the note at the end of this chapter. Till some years ago, there existed in Veerangere in the Mysore city a Brindavan popularly known as Kenda-Konda which used to be pointed out as the spot, where a widow immolated herself along with the corpse of her husband. But this Brindavan no longer exists at present.

vermins and of awful stench. Their belongings consisted of a few earthen vessels, one or two sickles, a few silver bracelets worth three or four rupees worn by women and two or three cows. These independent labourers also rented Government lands on which they paid a tax. These people sometimes when they were in actual want went to the woods and there gathered leaves, shrubs, roots and bamboo shoot which they boiled and with which they appeased their hunger.

A little above this class stood another class composed mostly of agriculturists on their own account. Their poverty did not allow them to hire any servants under them. They cultivated Government lands and paid yearly a rent of from Rs. 6 to 25. Their property consisted of a few cattle, a few small gold and silver trinkets, one or two copper vessels for drinking and a few more for eating purposes and some iron farm implements. They lived in mud houses rather more commodious and a little less filthy than of the above class. A large number of weavers, barbers, washermen and other workmen were included in this class. The cultivators of this class often found it hard to make both ends meet and were obliged to sell considerable quantities of their crop in advance before the harvest at low prices to enable them to pay the taxes and their dues to the money-lenders who exploited them. In such cases the cultivators had left to them food to last six or eight months in the year and for the remaining portion of the year they borrowed grain from their neighbours at 25 per cent interest even though the period was less than a year.

Besides those mentioned above, there existed various other grades of the population differing in their economic standing. About a tenth of the total population farmed lands large enough to require two, three or even four ploughs, paying a yearly rent of from hundred to three hundred rupees. They lived in fairly comfortable circumstances and had stores of grain lasting for the whole year and even leaving a surplus. Their dwelling houses were better and they and their wives had a change of dress which was rare among those below them. Their property consisted of a few gold and silver trinkets, some copper vessels, and a number of ploughs and other farming implements, some cotton spinning

wheels and various primitive tools of small value. Cattle was their chief source of wealth. Most of them were debtors as well as creditors and they were in no greater hurry to pay their creditors than their debtors were in a hurry to pay them. In times of distress these people, says Dubois, were able to keep their body and soul together on the smallest pittance of food consisting of millet, gruel and water. Other people including Brahmins also about 7 per cent of the population kept servants to aid them in cultivation, also traded in grain or other commodities and lent small sums of money at higher rates of interest. To this class belonged Gowdas or headmen of the villages who acted in their villages as rent collectors of Government, petty magistrates and public arbitrators. As these Gowdas were held responsible by Government for the payment of all taxes due to it, they were obliged to conciliate the villagers to prevent their secretly migrating elsewhere and thereby throwing out the lands from cultivation and disabling these headmen from discharging their obligations in full to Government.

About one-thirtieth of the total population were possessed of property worth from one thousand to two thousand rupees and consisted mostly of Brahmins and Vaisyas with a few others. Their main occupations were agriculture, trading in grain and money-lending on such usurious terms as twenty-five, thirty and even fifty per cent interest. Most of them lived in decent houses which were kept neat and tidy. About 1/50 of the population owned property worth from Rs. 2000 to Rs. 5000 and Brahmins formed quite half of this class and the remainder generally was made up of the best men of the other classes. Their wealth consisted partly of *manyams* or lands exempt partly or wholly from taxation and partly of gardens planted with areca, cocoanut and other fruit trees and partly also of trinkets, money and cattle. Some of them also traded, while several others occupied posts in the Government Service. People worth more than Rs. 5000 generally lived in Agraharams and towns where they had opportunities for money-lending and trading on a fairly large scale. Persons worth from Rs. 5000 to Rs. 10000 or more did not exceed even a hundredth part of the total population and most of them, it is said, were Brahmins,

The women of certain castes were liable to be sold for committing adultery, such as the Lingayats and Kurubars. The women of the Hyga caste of Brahmins at Ramachandrapur were liable to be made over to the matham at that place if they were found guilty of adultery, in which case the people of the matham were privileged to sell them and some of them were compelled to labour in menial offices within the building. The Amildar and Sheristadar instituted an inquiry and if the charges were proved, they took charge of the women on public account. The patel, talari, the shanbogue and the revenue peons in each village were employed in bringing information to the public officers relative to the women.

NOTE TO CHAPTER XLIII.

In 1794 in the village of Pudupet in the Tanjore District a wealthy Vaisya merchant died and his widow expressed a desire to depart with her husband. Thereupon she received compliments from all and sundry for her resolve to fulfil her last duty to her husband as a faithful wife. A large concourse of people flocked together on the day when the ceremony took place. When everything was ready for the ceremony and the widow had been richly clothed and adorned, the bearers stepped forward to remove the body of the deceased which was placed in a sort of shrine ornamented with costly stuffs, garlands of flowers etc., the corpse being seated in it with crossed legs covered with jewels and clothed in the richest attire and the mouth filled with betel. Immediately after the funeral car followed the widow borne in a richly decorated palanquin. On the way to the burning ground she was met by an immense crowd of people who made prostrations to her and uttered loud cries of joy. As this ghastly procession moved along, the spectators, especially women, approached close to her and in virtue of prescience with which such a widow was credited solicited her to predict the happy things that would befall them. With a gracious and amiable mein she declared to one that she would long enjoy the favours of fortune, to another that she would be the mother of numerous children, to a third that she would live long and happily with a husband that would love and cherish her, to a fourth that her family was destined to attain much honour and dignity and so forth. She then distributed betel leaves among them which were received with extraordinary eagerness. When the widow reached the fatal spot, the calm demeanour which she had hitherto maintained was observed to have deserted her and she was found plunged in gloomy thought with no attention whatever to her surroundings ready to faint away. The priests who conducted the ceremony and the widow's near relatives encouraged her to keep up her courage. The people then near

her dragged her to a pond close by and plunged her into the water with her clothing and her ornaments. Immediately after, she was led to the place where her husband's body was on the funeral pyre. The pyre was surrounded by priests each with a lighted torch in one hand and a bowl of ghee in another. Her relatives and friends, several of whom were armed with muskets, swords and other weapons stood in a double line. At length the priest gave the fatal sign and the widow was instantly divested of all her jewels and dragged more dead than alive to the pyre. There she walked three times round the fire, two of her nearest relatives supporting her by the arms. She is stated to have accomplished the first round with tottering steps, during the second her strength forsook her and she fainted in the arms of her conductors who were obliged to complete the ceremony by dragging her through the third round. At last almost unconscious she was cast upon the corpse of her husband. At that moment the air resounded with acclamations. The priests emptied the contents of their vessels on the dry wood, applied their torches and in the twinkling of an eye the whole pyre was ablaze. Three times the unfortunate woman was then called by her name and when she made no answer, it was concluded that she had been translated to the region of her husband.