



## ISSUE OF *SOPPINA-BETTA* LAND IN UTTARA KANNADA DISTRICT DURING THE BRITISH COLONIAL PERIOD

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### Abstract

This paper deals with the issue of *soppina-betta* land (hills with brushes, trees and green leaves) in the Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka State. This issue became prominent during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to the forest acts passed by the British government in India. Beginning from the Forest Act of 1865, the British tried to acquire control over the forest resources and this curtailed the traditional forest rights and privileges of the people in the region of Uttara Kannada. The most affected class in the society was that of cultivators. The region was well-known for the cultivation of paddy, arecanut (*supari*), spices and sugarcane. The cultivators depended heavily on the forest for grazing cattle, green leaves, dry-leaves, brushwood, timber and wood needed for animal husbandry, cultivation, cooking, and other needs. The monopolisation of the forest resources by the colonial government affected the subsistence ethic of the people in the District. The changes introduced by the British government in the forest laws adversely affected the living condition of the people. The natural outcome was that they mobilised themselves and established 'Kanara Vanadhukka Nivarana Sangh' in 1887 and protested against the colonial government and its harsh policies. The protest against the forest laws was a part of the freedom struggle in Uttara Kannada. This paper is significant because it relates to environmental history and is mostly based upon primary sources collected from the Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai.

**Keywords:** *Soppina-betta* land; Forest Policy; Vanadhukka Nivarana Sangha

**Introduction:** *Betta* is a Kannada word meaning a hill. The cultivators of *supari* and pepper gardeners used the leaves of many trees, twigs and plants from the hill sides near their gardens as manure for the cultivated plants. Such type of hill was locally called as *soppina-betta*.<sup>1</sup> The branches of the tree with leaves were cut down and laid over the ground some two feet in depth. The branches were not burnt but left to decay and enter in to the soil. The *soppu* (leaves) was renewed for every three years and once in six years soil was placed over it to a depth of six to eight inches.<sup>2</sup> This practice preserved the moisture in the soil, and kept the plant cool, thereby protected the soil from soil erosion, impoverishment and degradation. Even in rice cultivation, the *soppu* was used as manure. In rice cultivation, it was used in different ways. It was not used directly as in garden cultivation. Further it was stored in a pond, and cow dung was spread over the leaves and kept for fermentation. The fermented leaves were used as manure during the time of cultivation. Beside these, the cultivators spread the green leaves under the feet of the cattle, the leaves trodden by the cattle and mixed with urine and cow dung were used as manure. The rice cultivators collected this *soppu* from nearby hills and forests. They used inferior kind of brush leaves, which was also known as *dorku* or *tarku* in local language. The foliage was obtained from the trees, chiefly of *matti* and *kindal*. The *betta* lands were marked by

the peculiar appearance of the trees. The colonial government, in the name of conservation, began to impose restrictions on the use of forest resources. W. Wedderburn, Second Assistant Collector of Kanara was appointed to give report on *soppina-betta* land. In 1864, he expressed the opinion that a proper supply of foliage for manure is absolutely indispensable for the cultivators and where a serious obstacle thrown in the way of such supply, the cultivation of areca gardens would have to be abandoned. The firewood was very much necessary for the garden cultivation in large quantity. The large quantity of firewood was required for boiling the arecanut and also for drying arecanut and cardamom.<sup>3</sup> The gardeners collected soil for their gardens and woods for agricultural implements and house building from the *betta* lands. Thus the *betta* or *soppina-betta* served as auxiliary land to the cultivators.

### **The British Policy towards *Soppina-betta*:**

From the beginning, the British government desired to exploit the forest resources of the District, and earn more revenue from the available timber. The timber was extensively grown in *betta* lands, and to exploit timber the government had to control the *betta* lands. In 1864 Shaw Stewart, the Collector instructed enquiries to find the origin of the custom of pollarding trees to manure spice and *supari* gardens.<sup>4</sup> The government appointed W. Wedderburn to send a report on *betta* lands. He reported that the ryots actually used the leaves and branches of the trees for manure, and each acre of garden land annually required 500 coolies' loads of leaves, and one acre of *betta* produced an average of only 50 loads in the year. Therefore, he opined that for proper cultivation of one acre of garden land in the Sirsi taluk, not less than eight to ten acres of *betta* land was essential. He expressed that the garden cultivation required much skill and care, if the foliage of green leaves was not properly supplied for the gardens for one year; it affected the yield of the garden land for the succeeding years. Therefore, he proposed allotment of *betta* lands for each garden, with marked boundary lines. He suggested that for an acre of garden, eight acres of *betta* lands could be allotted with four to eight *annas* assessment. All the superior quality timbers were reserved and the gardeners were allowed to use all the other trees for foliage, firewood, and for those minor requirements like manufacturing agricultural instruments. They were also allowed to take earth or mud (soil) from the *betta* lands for their gardens. This proposal was sanctioned under the G.R.No. 5020 dated 17<sup>th</sup> December 1864. On 8<sup>th</sup> June 1867, it was recognised and introduced in the taluks of Sirsi and Siddapur. The government recognised that the owners of the gardens enjoyed a prescriptive right to a large extent of *betta*, and this proposal continued till the general survey of lands.<sup>5</sup>

Colonel Anderson who was the survey and settlement officer for Kanara, after full local enquiry wrote a letter to the Collector of Kanara in 1868 and proposed certain rules for the guidance of survey officers who were about to commence their work.<sup>6</sup> He said that eight acres of *betta* land was the maximum area that could be allotted to an acre of garden land. If any gardener used more than eight acres of *betta* land, he might be restricted and if any gardener used less than eight acres of *betta* land, he could be permitted to use four more acres of *betta* land.<sup>7</sup> Two classes of *betta*

lands were created: one with assessment of eight *annas* per acre as originally proposed, and another at reduced rate of four *annas* per acre. In 1869, the government decided to levy some assessment on the *betta* lands to create a feeling of ownership among the ryots, but later on the government decided to allot certain extent of lands to each gardeners, and include the assessment in garden lands.<sup>8</sup> Under the G.R. NO. 663 of 1869, the gardeners were allowed to cut trees which were unreserved, however, changes were made after the suggestion of local authorities that the occupants could only pollard the trees, if they wanted to cut trees they had to take permission from the *Mamlatdar*.<sup>9</sup> The reserved trees were considered as an absolute property of the government. The government wanted to show that the *betta* lands were allowed for the gardeners as long as they paid revenue of the garden lands. It proved that the *betta* assignment was granted for occupants only for the improvement of their holdings and house, and not for sale or exportations.<sup>10</sup> Later on the Forest Department objected to cutting of trees under the orders of *Mamlatdars* in *betta* lands. The government decided under its R. No. 5114 of 13<sup>th</sup> December 1871 that with the exemption of the reserved kinds of trees, the ryots were permitted to cut the trees within their customary *betta* lands.<sup>11</sup> It was clear that the *betta* lands were inseparable parts of the gardeners, but the gardeners had no right to pollard any reserved kinds of trees, they could use only unreserved kinds of trees from their *betta* lands.

#### **The Inhabitants Versus the British Government:**

The inhabitants of Uttara Kannada believed that the government controlled the *betta* lands to develop teakwood plantations on them. Though Wedderburn had recommended about eight acres of *betta* land per acre of garden land, at the time of survey settlement, generally only two to three acres of *betta* lands were allotted per acre of garden land. Only in some cases, five to six acres of *betta* lands were allotted to the gardeners. Thus due to reduced size of the *betta* lands, and frequently changing forest rules, the cultivators failed to get sufficient manure for agriculture. Therefore, no improvements were made on cultivable lands. Many lands were left uncultivated, and in some cases ryots began to relinquish their lands.<sup>12</sup> The general complaint of garden cultivators was that the allotment of *betta* lands made at the survey and settlement was not sufficient.<sup>13</sup>

The forest acts and their provisions imposing restriction on the *betta* lands became so intolerable that in 1891 the ryots represented their problems to the government and pointed out that the *betta* land had lost its meaning to the cultivators. They also complained that they were no longer allowed to take soil from the *betta* or from the forest lands in order to sustain the fertility of the gardens. Further, they stated that they were not allowed to take leaves from the government forest that adjoined the *betta* lands, or to clear the land up to 100 yards around the garden lands in order to protect the garden from the wild animals, flood and fire.<sup>14</sup> Besides, they reported that they were prohibited from digging ditches around their *betta* lands in order to prevent the entry of cattle. A new grazing fee of two *annaas* per head of cattle was levied.<sup>15</sup> The ryots also sent many petitions to the authorities. However, the restrictions were relaxed only to six kinds of reserved trees which were listed in 1881 for the *betta* lands.<sup>16</sup> Rules were framed to restrict use of *soppu* manure in the *betta*

lands as per the newly amended Kanara Protected Forest rule in 1890. The branches longer than nine inches could not be cut.<sup>17</sup> The government declared that all the forest products were the property of the State. Not contented with the stand of the government the ryots again sent many petitions to it. The petition forced the government to form a Committee of three officers. Consequently, the government constituted a Committee comprising of R. A. Lamb, Acting Collector of Kanara; W. D. Sheppard, Forest Survey Officer, Kanara; and G. K. Bentham, Divisional Forest Officer, Southern Division, Kanara, to investigate into the condition of the garden cultivators.<sup>18</sup> The gardeners suggested an experiment to be conducted whereby half of the garden to be managed using techniques of the ryots, and half according to the notions of the forest officials.<sup>19</sup> The final report of the Committee was submitted in the year 1893. The Committee was of the opinion that the gardeners generally required nine to ten acres of *betta* land per acre of garden.<sup>20</sup> The Committee also recommended the assignment of *bena* or grass producing lands for gardeners. The Committee proposed two changes, that is, to clause 5 (a) and (b) of Kanara Protected Forest Rule. The new rules stated thus: “ any garden cultivators may between June 1<sup>st</sup> and October 31<sup>st</sup> cut and remove without payment and licence for use as manure or cattle-bedding such green leaves and twigs of all the trees (except teak, sandalwood, blackwood, *matti*, *honi*, *hirda*, *abnus*, *shigekai*, *surhoni* and *karimuttal*) as he may require from those portion of the protected forest outside his *betta* assignment which are set aside by the government for this purpose, provided that this privilege shall not be exercised by any individual possessing nine acres and upwards of *betta* land per acre of garden.” Davidson, the Collector of Kanara approved these rules as a temporary measure until the *betta* assignments were revised and pointed out that the rules only covered the existing practice and were not new.<sup>21</sup>

The report of the Committee was discussed by a number of officials over the next two years. R. C. Wroughton, Conservator of the Forest for Southern Circle, expressed his disagreement with the proposal of the committee. Further he said that their proposal to assign 10 acres of trees covered land for each garden was almost preposterous. He also proposed that 5 acres was sufficient for the gardens in Sirsi and Siddapur. He also opposed the assignment of *bena* or grass producing land.<sup>22</sup> Macgregor, the forest officer was also not satisfied with the committee’s recommendation. He was not convinced that 10 acres of forest were needed for an acre of garden land. He recommended that the assignments were to be made with reference to the character of the ground and the quantity of material that it was capable of supplying for garden lands. Both officers had the opinion that the terrible condition of the *betta* lands was entirely due to their being misused by the cultivators.<sup>23</sup>

In the year 1894, Nugent, Commissioner for Southern Division, sent a proposal to the government and reiterated that most shortages in *soppu* were direct consequences of the misuse of *betta* lands by the gardeners themselves. In such a situation, the commissioner suggested that the forest department should make up the shortages by allowing cultivators to remove *soppu* from the protected forest, but on

payment per-head load. The commissioner argued that additional *betta* assignment should be granted only where it was proved beyond doubt that the original assignments were insufficient.

Nugent thought that such a re-survey could usefully be undertaken in Yellapur, since the earlier survey had been somewhat faulty. In Sirsi and Siddapur taluks, however, he did not see the need for the revision, as in those taluks, the *betta* lands were allotted with far greater care and more scientifically. In some instances, the average of *betta* given may, as stated by the committee, have been comparatively small- “5, 4 ½ or even only 4 acres per acre of garden, but the quality of the land must be borne in mind as well as the quality, and I see little ground to doubt that originally the quantity was adequate, and that if it is now sufficient, this is the result of the reckless improvidence and wasteful habits of the garden-holders.<sup>24</sup>

The *betta* lands were known as *hadi* lands in the coastal strip. These were the small patches of jungles near to rice fields. The occupants allowed collecting dead woods for fuel and dry-leaves for cattle bedding and graze their cattle freely in these areas.<sup>25</sup> The Kanara Permit Rules (1864) recognised the right to remove leaves and grass for manure purpose from the adjoined forest of rice lands in the coastal taluks. However, as per the R. No. 8205 of 1902, under the Kanara Protected Forest Privilege Rule the word dry leaves was used for the first time and removal of *soppu* or green leaves was prohibited except within 66 feet from the rice field. But the 66 feet adjoined to rice field was not sufficient to provide enough *soppu*. Moreover, many rice fields of coastal taluks did not adjoin the forest. V. D. Yennemadi, District Deputy Collector had the opinion that it was a general belief of the cultivators, that the manure made of green leaves had more fertilising properties than the manure prepared with dry leaves. They collected green leaves during the months of June to November and the fresh leaves were used as litter. The fresh leaf manure was believed to be more fertile than the artificial manure.<sup>26</sup> The forest resettlement officer for Ankola taluk (1908), Macgregor opined that the rice tract in the coastal area came under the evergreen forest belt and, if the rice cultivators were granted *betta* land, they would ruthlessly cut the forest. He also opined that because of this reason from the beginning of the survey settlement operations, the rice cultivators of coastal lands were not allotted *hadi* or *betta* lands by the forest department and he recommended the suppression of the practice.<sup>27</sup> The dry-leaves were universally used by the below ghat region cultivators. In some places the green leaves were not used because the forest was in far distance from the rice fields and in such places cultivators collected sufficient quantity of dead leaves to use in the rainy season.<sup>28</sup> They collected dry leaves from December to May. Dry leaves were brought in nets for cattle bedding, by occupants accompanied by women and children of their family with one or two head load per day. The rich cultivators brought leaves occasionally in carts and the inhabitants near to riversides, used to send fisherman to bring dry-leaves. He convinced the people of Ankola taluk to take up *hadi* lands on tenure system. In some villages of Ankola taluk, it was impossible to grant *hadi* lands individually, because, the rice lands were not always adjoined to forests. In such places, community *hadi*

lands were allowed. In parts of Kumta, Honnavar and Bhatkal taluks, portions of forest lands were allowed to the individual occupants, under *hadi* tenure. In some villages of Ankola and Kumta, the villagers claimed their right on the hillsides adjoining near to their villages. Some villagers combined themselves, and appointed a Muslim man to keep off outside villagers. In spite of many restrictions the cultivators continued with the practice of removing green leaves for manure from their adjoining forests. Therefore, V. D. Yennemadi suggested legalising this practice which could not be prevented by law. He had the view that if this concession which was of great use for the cultivators, it would help the government to obtain the cooperation of the peasants. However, his proposal was not recommended by H. Murry, the Conservator of Forest, Southern Circle.<sup>29</sup> Though the ryots frequently memorialised to government to allow the use of green leaves for manure purpose from forest, the strenuous opposition of forest department came in the way of granting the concession.

The enforcement of the forest laws had become so unbearable to the inhabitants of the region that they organised themselves and formed *Vana-Dukha Nivarana Sabha* in 1886-1887, and *Vana-Dukha Nivarana Sammelana* in 1917 and protested against the government. The local press also supported them.<sup>30</sup> This dissatisfaction led to the Forest Satyagraha during the time of Non-cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movement. The forest satyagraha posed a severe challenge to the district administration. It involved many hundreds of people, who frequently turned to violence. It reduced the revenue of the government from the forest department during the year 1930-31. According to the government statistics, it had a loss of Rupees 2,000,000 as a result of forest satyagraha. The women folk also played a notable role in the forest satyagraha. When men of their families were arrested, they symbolically violated the forest laws.<sup>31</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Thus from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, there was a dispute between cultivators and government. It was on the matter of rights and privileges of the inhabitants to use forest resources. The ryots always claimed that it was their traditional right to take green leaves for manure from the forest. But the government in the name of conservation, tried to curtail the privileges of the cultivators. There was a difference of opinion among the British officials about the *betta* lands and their allotment. However, nothing much was done to alleviate the grievances of the ryots. Thus the forest grievances provided the much needed prop for the rise of anti-colonial sentiments in the region. In fact fight against the Forest Acts and their provisions became a part of the national movement in the region of Karnataka.

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### **Notes and references:**

\*\*I gratefully acknowledge the guidance received from Prof. N. Shyam Bhat, Department of History, Goa University, for writing this paper.

- <sup>1</sup>Letter from W.C. Wedderburn, Second Assistant Collector of Kanara to M. J. Shaw Stewart, Collector of Kanara, 7<sup>th</sup> May 1864, (Revenue Department) *RD*, Vol. No.45, 1862-64, (Maharashtra State Archives) *MSA*, paragraph, 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Letter from J. L. Lushington, Superintendent of Land Records and Agriculture (Southern Division)*SD* to Collector of Canara, Belgaum, 18<sup>th</sup> October 1885, *RD*, Vol. No116, *MSA*.
- <sup>3</sup>Letter from W. C. Wedderburn, Second Assistant Collector of Kanara to M. J. Shaw Stewart, Collector of Kanara, 7<sup>th</sup> May 1864, *RD*, Vol. No.45, 1862-64, *MSA*, paragraph, 3.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid*; paragraphs, 2-5; Letter from Collector of Kanara to Collector of Southern Division, Kanara, 6<sup>th</sup> June 1889. *RD*, Vol. No. 87. *MSA* ; Letter from Collector of Kanara to Commissioner, *SD*, No. 1780 of 1889, *RD*, Vol. No. 87 of 1889, *MSA*, paragraph, 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Letter from Collector of Kanara to W. Wedderburn, Second Assistant Collector of Kanara, No. 595, 12<sup>th</sup> March 1864, *RD*, Vol. No. 45, *MSA*, paragraph. 3.
- <sup>6</sup> Letter from W. C. Anderson, Survey Commissioner *SD*, to Collector of Kanara, No. 639 of 1868, dated 25<sup>th</sup> December 1868, quoted in Letter from R. C. Wroughton Conservator of Forest, Southern Circle to Commissioner Southern Division, No.568 of 1893-94, dated 27<sup>th</sup> April 1893, Belgaum, *RD*, Vol. No. 119 of 1895, *MSA*, p. 50.
- <sup>7</sup> Letter from R. C. Wroughton Conservator of Forest, Southern Circle to Commissioner *SD*, No.568 of 1893-94, dated 27<sup>th</sup> April 1893, Belgaum, *RD*, Vol. No. 119 of 1895, *MSA*, p. 51.
- <sup>8</sup> Report on the *Betta* lands by J. R. Naylore, Legal Affairs, No.1040 of 1891, 21<sup>st</sup> July 1891, Poona, *RD*, Vol. No. 119 part II, *MSA*.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid* ; Letter from Acting Collector of Kanara to Revenue Commissioner, *SD*, No. 508 of 1869, March 1869, pp.155-168; Government Resolution No. 663 of 15<sup>th</sup> February 1869, *RD*, Vol. No. 30 of 1869, *MSA*, paragraph 2 ; Government Resolution No. 2451, 18<sup>th</sup> June 1869, *RD*, Vol. No.39, *MSA*.
- <sup>10</sup> Note to accompany the Commissioner's letter to the government, dated 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 1891, Woodrow's Suggestion, *RD*, Vol. No. 117 part II, *MSA*, p.22.
- <sup>11</sup> Report on the *Betta* lands by J. R. Naylore, Remembrancer, Legal Affairs, No.1040 of 1891, 21<sup>st</sup> July 1891, Poona, *RD*, Vol. No. 119 part II, *MSA*.
- <sup>12</sup> Memorial of ryots of North Kanara to Lord Harris, Governor in Council of Bombay, 14<sup>th</sup> August 1891, *RD*. Vol. No. 116 of 1895, *MSA*, pp.1-2 ; Petitions sent by Narayan Ganapati Bhat, inhabitant of Sirsi taluk and 605 ryots of Noth Kanara against the rule of protected forest, No. 145 of 1891, *RD*, Vol. No.116 of 1895, *MSA*, pp. 53-90.
- <sup>13</sup> J. L. Macgregor, Conservator of Forest, No. 889 of 1892, Camp Sirsi, 12<sup>th</sup> March, 1892, *RD*, Vol. No.129 of 1893, *MSA*, para. 6.
- <sup>14</sup> Petitions send by Narayan Ganapati Bhat, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 53-60.
- <sup>15</sup> Petition from Umamaheshwar Ganapati Hegde and 100 other ryots of Sirsi to the Collector of Kanara, 30<sup>th</sup> January 1891, *RD*, Vol. No. 116, *MSA*.

- <sup>16</sup> Letter from Commissioner *SD* to Collector of Kanara, No. 3637 dated 17<sup>th</sup> September 1891, *RD*, Vol. No. 190 of 1891.
- <sup>17</sup> Memorial of ryots of North Kanara to Lord Harris, Governor in Council of Bombay, 14<sup>th</sup> August 1891, *RD*, Vol. No. 116 of 1895 *MSA*, pp.1-10.
- <sup>18</sup> J. Macgregor, Conservator of Forests, Southern Commissioner, *SD*, No. 6237, 10<sup>th</sup> February 1894, *RD* 1895, Vol.117, *MSA*.
- <sup>19</sup> Memorial of ryots of North Kanara to Lord Harris, *Op. Cit.*, pp.1-8.
- <sup>20</sup> Report of the Committee on Amend Kanara Protected Forest Rule, p.30, *RD*, Vol. No.119 part II of 1895,
- <sup>21</sup> Letter from J. Nugent, Commissioner for *SD* to Chief Secretary to Government, *RD*, No. 1242 of 1894, *RD*, Vol. No. 119 part II of 1895, *MSA*, pp.76-77.
- <sup>22</sup> Letter from R. C. Wraughton, Conservator of Forest, Southern Circle to Commissioner of *SD*., No.568 of 1893-94, Belgaum, 27<sup>th</sup> April, 1893, *RD*, Vol. No.119 part II, of 1895, *MSA*,pp.50-53.
- <sup>23</sup> Minute by the Honourable Mr. Trevor, dated 8<sup>th</sup> April 1895, *RD*, Vol. No. 117 part II of 1895, *MS*, p.225.
- <sup>24</sup> Letter from J. Nugent, Commissioner for *SD* to Chief Secretary to Government, *RD*, No. 1242 of 1894, *RD*, Vol. No. 119 part II of 1895, *MSA*, pp.75-78.
- <sup>25</sup> G. L. Macgregor, Forest Settlement Officer to Collector of Kanara, No. 1097 Of 1909, *RD*. Vol. 45, *MSA*, para, 30; L.C. Swifte, Collector of Kanara to Commissioner *SD*, No. 776 of 1909, Camp Malgi, 15<sup>th</sup> February 1909, *RD*, Vol. 45 of 1910, *MSA*, paragraph. 11.
- <sup>26</sup> Accompaniments to G.R. Resolutions, *RD*, No. 1550, dated 19<sup>th</sup> February 1910, V. D. Yennemadi, Deputy Collector of Kanara to Collector of Kanara. *RD*, Vol. No.107 of 1910, *MSA*, pp. 17-18.
- <sup>27</sup> *Forest Survey Settlement* of Ankola taluk by Macgregor in the year 1916-17, *MSA*, pp.435-444.
- <sup>28</sup> Accompaniment to Government Resolution Revenue Department No. 1550 dated 19 April 1910 by H. Murry Conservator of Forest , *RD*, Vol. No. 107, 1910, *MSA*.
- <sup>29</sup> H. Murry, Conservator of Forest Southern Circle, *RD*, Vol. No.107, 1910, *MSA*, p. 23.
- <sup>30</sup> Dr. Bhagyashree Naik, "Uttara Kannada District (1862-1947): A Study in Colonial Administration and Regional Response", unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Goa University, 2015, pp. 191-199.
- <sup>31</sup> *Kanaravrtta*, (Kannada Newspaper)dated : 25-9-1930.

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