

Socio-cultural study of costal belt of Karnataka as perceived by Pietro Della Valle

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Abstract:

Pietro Della Valle (1586-1682) is one among the prominent European travellers, apparently an Italian nobleman who visited and recorded the socio-cultural and political conditions of South India. The seventeenth century globetrotter who was also a musicologist travelled to Middle East, Northern Africa and India. The current research paper makes an effort to highlight prominent socio-cultural elucidations as perceived by Pietro Della Valle confined to the contemporary southern Karnataka also known as Dakshina Kannada besides special focus on North Kanara and Ikkeri.

Keywords:

Dakshina Kannada, Ikkeri, Mangalore, North Kanara, *devadasi*, *Brahmanas*, Untouchability, *aliya santana*, *Lingayath*, *Maha Sati Kallu*, *Jogi Math*

Introduction:

Socio-cultural conditions is the term used to describe the practices, beliefs, customs, food, costumes, social norms and behaviours of the people of a particular society. The socio-cultural conditions of India is diverse in character and has changed from time to time. India witnessed varied socio-cultural conditions from the beginning of civilisation till today. Indian society differs in languages, races, communities, religious practices, customs and traditions, type of family, family relationships and so on. There are many disparities even between the society of North India and South India. The southern part of India is well-known for its rich cultural diversity. The state of Karnataka has a different social condition which varies from place to place and the practices of coastal Karnataka are entirely different from the plain regions of Karnataka.

Many foreigners visit India to explore the alluring culture of India. In ancient times, foreign travellers like Fahien, Hiuen Tsang came to India for the purpose of attaining knowledge. The travellers who visited India have documented varied descriptions of political, social, economic and cultural conditions of India prevailing at the time of their visit. During medieval times, several Persian and Arab travellers visited India, whose writings helped the historians to write the history of the Muslim period.

The advent of the Europeans helped in the writing of the history of the period as they recorded what they saw in India in the form of diaries and letters.

With the arrival of the Portuguese to South India we get better documents to write the history of Vijayanagara Empire and also coastal Karnataka. Barbosa, Tome Pires, Vartema, Farnao Nunes and others provided a lot of information. They visited Vijayanagara Empire and other parts of South India and gave descriptions related to polity, religion, society and culture. Barbosa and T.Pires gave details about social customs, rules of untouchability, hierarchy, possibilities of marriage, professional activities and special prohibitions especially concerning food. Barbosa highlights social evils like sati system, *devadasi* system. Domingo Paes keenly observing the social conditions of India gave an account of the rituals and ceremonies of India. Later many Christian missionaries visited India to spread Catholic faith in India and they also recorded the social practices prevalent in India. Pietro Della Valle is one among these prominent European travellers who visited and recorded the social, cultural and political conditions of South India.

Pilgrimage of curiosity

Pietro Della Valle an Italian traveller voyaged to different nations and his voyage is termed as pilgrimage of curiosity. He travelled to Egypt, Middle East and India. He sailed and reached Surat on February 10, 1623 and from there he travelled to Goa, from Goa he moved southwards and reached Honnavara, visited Ikkeri, Basaruru, Mangalore, Ullal, Manel and Calicut. He used to write about his experiences in India in detail in epistle form to a professor of Naples. He wrote eight exhaustive letters regarding what he saw in India which was published in the form of a book in Italian language titled “Viaggi” during 1650-58 AD. Later it was translated into other languages. The travel account written by Pietro Della Valle is divided into three parts and the third part is related to India. He gave vivid description of political, social, economic, religious and cultural conditions of the places he visited.

When Pietro Della Valle visited South India the Vijayanagara Empire was weak and their feudatories, the Nayaks of Keladi emerged as powerful rulers. Later they shifted their capital to Ikkeri and exercised control over large areas extending their sway over the Kanara districts. With the accession of Sadashiva Nayaka to power, they had control over Mangalore and Barakuru. Venkatappa Nayaka was strong among the Nayaks and ruled from 1586-1629 AD. He freed himself from the rule of Vijayanagara Empire and ruled his kingdom independently. He attacked Gerasoppe which was earlier under the control of Adilshahis of Bijapur, defeated and killed the queen of Gerasoppe. He wanted to check the Portuguese influence over the west coast who wished to establish their factory at Mangalore with the help of Bangaraja of Mangalore. In his account of this period Pietro Della Valle describes the political developments of South Kanara. The queen of Ullal married Bangaraja of Mangalore, later the quarrel between them led to

enmity. According to Pietro Della Valle, Venkatappa Nayaka helped the queen of Ullal against Bangaraja of Mangalore and Venkatappa Nayaka defeated Bangaraja and the Portuguese. After his defeat Bangaraja fled from Mangalore to Kasaragod and the queen of Ullal accepted the supremacy of Nayaks of Ikkeri.

Here an attempt is made to delineate the views of Pietro Della Valle regarding socio- cultural conditions of the North Kanara, Ikkeri and Mangalore. He describes in detail regarding festivals, temple practices, social customs and practices and political conditions. With the development of Varna system the caste system became rigid in India. From the ancient times, caste system played a dominant role and affected common people in an adverse way. Caste based differences is rampant all over India. Della Valle observed that people of India follow very strictly a rigid caste structure and people are identified based on their caste.

He says, among the gentiles the Brahmanas were noble race people, who followed the caste rules very rigidly in their life, especially with regard to food habits, they were strictly prohibited taking food with others even if others belong to a noble race.

Pietro Della Valle gives an account of the agrahara of Brahmanas at Honnavara and named it, *Villa de' Brahmani*. The Agraharas are the villages or parts of villages given to the Brahmanas as grant by the royal dynasties. These Agraharas also serve as important educational centres.

From the ancient times the Indians were predominantly vegetarians and restricted themselves with many rules regarding preparing and consuming of food. Pietro Della Valle observes that the people are orthodox in food habits and they consumed ghee, rice and curd. They never allowed others to cook, eat or even touch or use their cooking vessels.

Each caste and community in India has its own norms and practices. The Lingayath community as a prominent community in Karnataka has its own peculiar features. Pietro Della Valle gives an account of *Lingayath* norms and practices. According to him they were not supposed to kill or eat animals. He says that the King of Ikkeri, Venkatappa Nayaka a *Lingayath*, strictly followed vegetarian diet. He describes the funeral practices of Lingayath community where the dead body is carried in a sitting position on a chair and buried in the same position.

Della Valle observes that Untouchability prevailed in those days. The lower born faced a lot of restrictions in the society. They are not supposed to touch others and not allowed inside the houses of the upper caste people. Even at the time of death, the high class people refused to provide water to the low born.

Pietro Della Valle gives the description of the *aliya santana* system of inheritance, practiced in the west coast of India. Women play active role in politics in the coastal areas of Karnataka. Gerusoppa and Ullala were ruled by queens. In coastal areas sons do not succeed their fathers but sons of their sisters ascend the throne. He says since king of Ullala did not have nephews, his wife succeeded him. He gave his own reasons to *aliyakattu* of succeeding, the descent of woman is certain and the Issue by the Woman-side is much surer of the blood and lineage of the Ancestors.

Sati system was one of the cruel practices of Hindu society where a widow was burnt on her husband's funeral pyre. This social evil was widely practised during the medieval times in India, it's practise was common in North India. Later it spread to southern part of India, where the women who commit Sati were highly respected in the society. *Masti Kallu* or *Maha Sati Kallu* was installed in remembrance of woman becoming *Masti* or *Maha Sati*. Pietro Della Valle gave an account of Sati that took place at Ikkeri, where he describes an instance of preparation of woman to become *Masti*. He says people call woman a *Masti*, who intends to burn herself for the death of her husband. As preparation to become Sati, the woman committing Sati is taken in a procession on a horse by a group of people singing beating drums and other instruments for a few days. On the day of *Sati*, woman seated in a yard with nuptial dress, clothed all in white, decked with all types of gold ornaments on her, with garland of flowers on her head. He avers that *Sati* is an uncivilised practise, feels sad for that woman but he appreciates the woman's love towards her husband and in appreciation he wrote a poem in memory of her.

He gave the instances of *devadasi* system in Ikkeri and depicts the dancing of public dancing women in the festival of Aghoreshwara temple in Ikkeri. He describes the condition of widows, who are living like dead people by shaving their heads, with continuous sadness and lamentations in remembering their lost husbands.

He gives an account of *Jogi* tradition on the Kadri hills of Mangalore. He says *Jogi Math* was situated on the hill top of Kadri along with their small hermitages. When he visited *Jogi Math*, *jogis* numbers were less as they dispersed to different places. At certain times they assemble in huge numbers. The *Jogis* have their king, who possessed vast land, which fetched huge income to the Math. The *jogis* go to different temples as they please, and are not obedient to their king though they honour and revere him. Whereas the Christian monks are bound by rules and regulations of their sect.

Della Vella is fascinated by some of the daily practices of the people. One of them was applying cow dung plasters on the pavements to keep the houses and temples clean and elegant. He thought it as religious practice but realised later on that it is done to keep the places clean. Even the Portuguese in India used cow dung in their houses to keep their houses clean.

He stresses on the relevance of betel leaves to the people and explains the custom of accepting or giving betel leaves. The chewing of betel leaves is a common practice and he gives the picture of Venkatappa Nayaka's court, where the king is seen chewing the betel leaves and one of the courtiers holding the spittoons.

A detailed account of the festivals and the temple practices followed in the region is given by Pietro Della Valle. He gives the description of the Car festival in Ikkeri, procession of Idol of God with many people along with dancing women playing the musical instruments, dancing and singing. There are varieties of entertainment by the devotees and gives the description of devotees hanging from great height, fastening hooks on the flesh of the back. He has recorded ceremonies and customs followed in the temples.

He gives the description of an instance of teaching learning process held on the pavement of a temple where group of four students are learning by sharing their ideas not with the help of pen and paper but with the help of moving fingers on sand.

Conclusion:

The account of Della Valle gives a vivid picture of the socio-cultural conditions of North Kanara, Ikkeri and Mangalore. His account enlightens the reader and aids in comprehending the political, socio-cultural conditions of Karnataka in the seventeenth century. The observations of Della Valle is worthy of appreciation, as he observes even minor social practices with great élan. Though a foreigner to the cultural nuances of this nation, he did a remarkable job in depicting the socio-cultural practices of southern India, more specifically southern Karnataka.

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