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Panel 22:

**Karnataka Studies, Fragmented Polity, its Formation, Legitimization and Upward
Mobility of Backward Classes in South India – with special Reference to Karnataka
(1650-17619)**

**Some Aspects of Geography and the Fragmented Polity in
Karnataka
(16th to 18th century)**

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Some Aspects of Geography and the Fragmented Polity in Karnataka (16th to 18th century)

Writings on history have changed keeping in mind the aspects of time and space similarly the area of regional studies too has attracted the attention of scholars. Some such regional studies are of great relevance to the study of South Indian history. These works basically deal with political history of the region and it is desirable that the analysis of social conditions also be made in the context of regional territories and problems. To explore the dynamics of social and economic changes in South India, an attempt is being made in this paper to critically evaluate some aspects of geography in the context of fragmented polity of Karnataka between the sixteenth to eighteenth century.

During the last years of Vijayanagar rule, particularly after the battle of Talikota, many small tributary and regional kingdoms emerged in different parts of Karnataka which were ruled by chiefs referred to as Nayakas, Palegars and Nadaprabhus. The period extends roughly from early 16th century to late 18th century¹. Among these regional rulers mention may be made of Ikkeri Nayakas, Chitradurga Nayakas, Yelahanka Nada Prabhus, Mysore Wodeyars and others. These kingdoms had differing life-span, developmental patterns, geo-ecological environments and inevitably distinct forms of living experience as well as shared varied salient structural features and cultural identities. At their height, in the early seventeenth century, they encompassed and covered the greater part of Karnataka. This period saw the invasion of Mughals, Marathas and Adil Shahis, which added a new dimension to the political fragmentation in South India². The period also saw the British merchant adventurers succeeding in laying the foundation of an empire of a new type. In order to understand the historical process which lay behind these developments, it is necessary to analyse in detail, the geographical aspects which shaped the social, economic and political changes in sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in Karnataka.

One of the most important factors that shaped the post Vijayanagar state formation was the geography of the region. These fragmentary states that are referred to as *paleyapattus* were very small in geographical extent but still these palegars were able to sustain their power due to the strategic importance of the geographical location in Southern India. A deep study of geographical factors which shaped the emergence of these regional states will enable us to better understand the historical changes during this period. This is an attempt to fill the lacuna, some of these states have been neglected by the historians. Most of the general

histories of India do not even mention the Nayakas, treating the period from the decline of Vijayanagar to the rise of Hyder Ali in Mysore as something akin to a black hole in South Indian history. In the last two decades there were efforts to sketch the later medieval history of South India, very particularly post Vijayanagar period. Some noted historians Burton Stein, Noboru Karashima, David Ludden and Nicholas Dirks led the movement³.

During the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Karnataka witnessed marked visible changes in its economic profile. New crops were grown, there was a large scale expansion in the sphere of manufacturing and production while a number of marketing centres referred to as *pettais* and *patnams* emerged all over Karnataka⁴. The ruling chiefs were aware of the revenue potential of trade both inland and overseas. The Nayakas were interested in the trade of war animals – both horses and elephants. The demand for these animals were an important feature of Vijayanagar and post Vijayanagar trade both inland and overseas. Local requirement for horses expanded or contracted with the extent of warfare in a particular period. West Asia was an important source of these animals which met the requirement.

Sixteenth and seventeenth century trade developments in Southern India encouraged the Western trading companies to establish their trading settlements on the west and east coast. Naturally the local chiefs developed contacts with them. Trade during the Nayakas rule was facilitated by the consumption centered ideology of the period. They were encouraged import of precious metals into their kingdom. Trade was also encouraged because it went hand-in-hand with diplomacy. The Nayakas were keen to link themselves with distant lands through trade contacts. Sources referred ships owned by the sultans of Khedah and Johar appear on the East coast bringing gifts for the Nayakas and other Chiefs. Thus the Nayakas interest in trade operated at various levels⁵.

The North Western flank of this peninsular trade system during the Vijayanagara rule was Bankapur while the South Western flank was Srirangapatna. Both of these Karnataka towns were linked to major emporia along the Arabian Sea coast from Chaul in the North to Cannanore in the South. Substantial customs dues were collected from the trade. These interior towns and places like Mysore and Ikkeri also served as assembly point for commodities and generated additional customs revenues on the eastern flank of this trade system. Added to this there were the Coramandal ports like Motupalli, south to Pulicat, just north of modern Madras. They were connected to Vijayanagar by a major route linking the

important pilgrimage centre at Tirupathi, the manufacturing and trade town of Penukonda and the important fortress towns of Chandragiri and Chitradurga.

The trade routes linking the Vijayanagara capital Hampi, along the cities and towns of central and coastal Karnataka were well developed during the Vijayanagara period. These trade routes were dotted with commercial and manufacturing activity. It is interesting to note that even after the decline of Vijayanagar, these trade routes thrived and many of the trade routes connected the kingdoms of the Nayakas who become powerful after the decline of the Vijayanagar empire. The Nayakas made deliberate attempts to attract peasants, traders and artisans to come and settle in their respective kingdoms⁶. The economic wealth derived from trade, later become one of the reasons for the strained relationship between local chiefs and European merchants. Arguments, frictions, military actions became a regular feature indicating strained relations between local chiefs and European merchants. Naturally the Europeans took advantage of the situation and combined the trade with territorial interest and succeeded in establishing their power over both.

Demography and geography influenced the political formation and agrarian institutions in southern India. Though historians differ on the question of absolute population we may say that it may have been around 25 million. It should be noted that the strength of the population of the Southern peninsula was less significant from its distribution, bearing in mind the differing capacities of various parts of the peninsula to support people. From this perspective, the coastal plains were zones with high population spreading over different types of trade activities. There were other zones of high agriculture population in the riverine basins of Kaveri and Tungabhadra Basins⁷.

One of the striking features of the late Vijayanagar period was the movement of cultivating groups in to various parts of South Indian macro-region. These migrating groups cleared forest, developed irrigation facilities and extended cultivation in many of the virgin plains. Besides, medieval handicrafts enabled people to develop their own specialized fields of production. Invariably class of people including merchants and artisans moved to the region of south including Bangalore, succeeding in their establishments. These migrations resulted in significant demographic changes in many parts of southern Karnataka. As a result of these migrations new tracts were opened up and existing tracts were developed through tank irrigated agriculture. Expansion of agriculture and growth of trade provided the means for

supporting numerous small chieftaincies⁸. These chiefs become an important element in the political formation of Karnataka during sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

The Yelahanka chiefs rose to political prominence during the 16th century having their capital at Yelahanka. Ranabaire Gowda the legend hero migrated from Kanchi region to the present day Yelahanka region during the early 15th century. The modest origin of this family is preserved in the title "Gowda" which usually means village head man, a lineage title used by the family founder, Jaya Gowda. During the time of Krishnadevaraya, villages were added to the family holdings around Yelahanka doubling its area. During the time of Achutadevaraya getting a grant of 12 villages increased the domain of the kingdom. Kempegowda founded the fortified town of Bengaluru and gathered to himself more villages. The attempts made by Yelahanka Prabhus to encourage migration of peasants and traders into the kingdom, building of tanks and reservoirs, construction of temples, and donations made to Brahmins, establishment of mint and issuing coins on his own indicate the attempts made by a small chief of peasant origin to establish a territorial kingdom⁹.

One of the rich zones of agriculture in Karnataka, the Kaveri river region became the centre of political activity of Wodeyer chiefs during the later part of Vijayanagar rule. The family established control over the fortress of Srirangapatna and entered the service of Krishnadevaraya. The Wodeyers benefited from Krishnadevaraya's defeat of the Ummathur rulers who had control over Srirangapatna. As a result, the geographical extent of Wodeyer kingdom further stretched over fertile lands around Mysore and Bangalore. During the rule of Raja Wodeyar, they emerged as independent chiefs and established their direct contact with others.

The Tulu Country on the west coast was one of the chief areas of international trade during sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This was the ancestral homeland of Tulu kings. Tulu country had several important ports like Bhatkal, Barakur and Mangalore. The sources of this period indicate that most taxes were paid in money and Barakur and Mangalore had mints whose coinage circulated widely. There were references to corporate mercantile and artisan bodies throughout the Tuluva region, which is reflected in the rich donations they made to temples¹⁰. There are also references to merchants of Tuluva country importing ceramic ware and cloth from China. The growth of trade and economic prosperity contributed to the political fortunes of Tuluva chiefs.

In Northern Karnataka, the Keladi chiefs emerged from obscurity in the decade before Krishnadevaraya's rule. The founder of the family Chowda, a young farmer became a warrior Chief and later distinguished himself in service under a Vijayanagara Commander. Later he became an independent ruler¹¹. The Nayakas of Ikkeri in Northern Karnataka played an opportunistic and significant role in Rama Rajas adventures in the Deccan. During the war in 1614, Venkatappa Nayaka, taking advantage of the situation extended his power over neighbouring chiefs, expanded the Ikkeri Kingdom along with Canara coast (Tulu Rajya) and a great part of adjacent upland (Male Rajya). The Nayakas promoted overseas trade by extending various concessions to the trading communities including Portuguese. The Canara Coast trade was dominated by Konkani speaking Saraswath Brahmins while the Hindu and Jaina merchants played a minor role. However, the overseas trade was largely dominated by Arabs, Jews and the Portuguese. The Land holding in this highly favoured zone of wet cultivation was in the hands of trading groups called Nagara and Settikara, who were linked to ruling chiefs. The trading groups concentrated on production of grain and spices and other local products. Barakur had three local settikara groups who made liberal donations to Hindu and Jaina shrines as a mark of respect to their favoured religion. These traders enjoyed the protection of chiefs in whose territories they operated and to whom they paid revenue on their trade and industrial production¹².

A study of geographical aspects which contributed to the fragmented polity of Karnataka will help us to clearly understand the socio-economic and political changes during 16th to 18th centuries. The evolution and domination of these small regional states was conditioned by geographical opportunities as well as geographical limitations. The regional kingdoms on the coastal region thrived due to coastal ports and growth of European trade. This contributed to economic strength of Tuluva and Ikkeri Nayakas. Opportunities for trade which were explored during sixteenth and seventeenth centuries led to political battles between local chiefs and Europeans and among Europeans themselves. This maritime trade during the period under study changed the character of South Indian political geography.

Notes and References

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