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KARNATAKA STUDIES

Harvesting and Management of Monsoon Waters as “*Keredharma*”for Irrigation –  
Legends and Myths surrounding the process

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Archaeological and Literary sources identified the innumerable details regarding the Harvesting and the Management of Monsoon Waters for irrigation in South India and specially in Karnataka. South Indian Rivers were non-perennial. Most of them dried up in summer. Hence the people who were in the business of agriculture had to resort to harvesting monsoon water in the form of Tanks and Reservoirs. Water management techniques are described in the *Kaifiyats* and other sources provides ample of details. The sources narrate the rituals and legends related to tanks and reservoirs. The whole process was called ‘*Keredharma*’ and it was the basis of storage economy of South India. This was universally followed by all the *Paleyagars* of the Fragmented Polity. Thomas Munroe an able East India Company administrator in South India once wrote that it was difficult to find a suitable place for the construction of new tanks in South India, which applies to Karnataka region also. This is a tribute to the wisdom of the people who lived at the local levels and mobilized surplus for *Paleyapattus*. The present paper investigates all these interesting aspects.

One of the theories related to the study of post-vijayanagara agrarian system of India suggests that the Indian village had always been economically and socially stagnant as well as unchanging. There was hardly any motive or incentive for the development of agriculture. Such a theory has to be re-evaluated in the light of Kannada *Kaifiyats* collected by Colonel Collins Mackenzie between 1799-1821 in South India. 1

The concept and implementation of what is called ‘*Keredharma*’ have been widely recorded not only in Kannada *Kaifiyats* but also epigraphs. But there is an important difference between these two types of sources. As legal records inscriptions of South India are very brief in their references to *Keredharma*. On the

other hand Kannada *Kaifiyats* are more descriptive in character. But some scholars are hesitating to accept these and they term these terms as Myths and Legends. But this information throws light on the inner working of the rural system of post-vijayanagara period. 2

The word '*Kaifiyat*' is an Arabic term and it simply means a narrative. This name was given by Colonel Collins Mackenzie to history, legends and myths of villages he visited and about which he collected historical documents. In India such local tracts were generally known under the name *Sthala Puranas*. they record how *Keredharma* relating to the construction, maintenance and protection of irrigational tanks was quite widespread. It was considered as *Dharma* by every class and caste of the South-Indian polity and society. Participation in *Keredharma* was vital to the agrarian economy of the region which was depended mainly on monsoon showers and that had to be in the form *Kere* or tank. Here an attempt is made to describe various aspects of *Keredharma* as reflected in some of the *Kaifiyats* in which here and there the myths and legends appears and supplies lot of information regarding the harvesting and management of monsoon water by the people in the fragmented polity which was ruled during the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century Karnataka. Here the references may be made of the *Kaifiyats* like *Arikutarada Kaifiyattu*, *Yagati Kaifiyattu*, *Kokkasamudrada Kaifiyattu* and *Sulekere Kaifiyattu* and also other sources which are the base for our discussion here. The evidence from *Kaifiyats* bear ample testimony to the contribution made by the so called lowest sections of the society like the depressed castes including the *Kiratas* and *Prostitutes* in their own way to the rural settlements through *Keredharma*.

Before we examine the *Keredharma* as depicted in the *Kaifiyats*, *Bhakairs* and *Kadatas* we may briefly outline some of the evidence related to aspect as recorded in the epigraphs of Karnataka. Karnataka inscriptions refer to construction and maintenance of tanks with interesting details. Apart from Rivers, the large part of Karnataka depended largely on storage tanks and on wells dug deep into the earth. The inscriptions frequently speak of tank irrigation. There existed a network of tanks or reservoirs in which the rain water was caught and stored for the purpose of cultivation of crops. Almost every village in Karnataka may said to have one or the more tanks.

According to the existing epigraphical evidences, the state as well as private agencies came forward to construct tanks 3 as well as temples and village assemblies.4 Private individuals, also constructed tanks 5. Women and ascetics 6 came forward to provide funds for the construction of tanks7. Such private enterprises were exempted from the payment of taxes 8. The expert knowledge of tank construction was called '*Valasastra*' and the hydraulic engineer was called *Jalasutra* 9. The rulers of the post-Vijayanagara period had identified twelve essentials required to construct an excellent tank and six faults 10. In this connection *Keredharma* occupied the central ideal in their economy. *Dharma* here signifies merit, which was believed to be accrued to the persons who not only

construct a tank but also restore an old ruined tank. For e.g., an inscription of 15<sup>th</sup> century records thus the significance of the Keredharma – “ A ruined family, a breached tank or pond, a fallen kingdom, who ever restores or repairs a damaged temple acquired merit”<sup>11</sup>. Sir Thomas Munro, a famous British administrator of 19<sup>th</sup> century wrote thus about the possibilities of construction of tanks in Bellary

District of Karnataka, which was the heart of the Vijayanagara Empire thus: “to attempt the construction of the new tanks is perhaps a more hopeless experiment than the repair of those which have filled up, for there is scarcely any place, where a tank can be made that has not been applied for this purpose by the inhabitants”<sup>12</sup>. Thus the epigraphical evidences from Karnataka elsewhere emphasize Keredharma in rural economy of the Post\_Vijayanagara period.

Inscriptions refer to Tanks as Kere, Katte, Sagara, samudra, and Tataka and also some times called Hiriya kere, Heggere, Doddakere, Chikkakere, Sannakere and Kannekere<sup>13</sup>. These sources will not inform about the extent of tanks and reservoirs and for how many acres of land these reservoirs irrigate etc., The Bakhair gives us the list of Kere, katte, kunte etc., These also do not refer to the extent of tanks. Francis Buchanan traveled all along Mysore State says that those supplies drinking water for animal are called katte, those supplies for irrigation to the lands referred as kere(tanks) <sup>14</sup>. He also further says that in that land was dug squarely and watered in it called kunte. But not informed about the extent of Tanks.<sup>15</sup> Another category is the water flows from river and some from rainy water. Most of the tanks in Karnataka are made up of rain water.

After the fall of Vijayanagara the nayaks of keladi paleyagars of Chitradurga and the Wodeyars of Mysore took up the construction of and the maintenance of tanks, wells, canals etc which are considered as the welfare measures for the benefit of the general public. They did not lag behind in the yeomen service of which they did get name and fame in their contemporary period. Though the resources were very scarce still they have done wonderful job in this regard. They considered these things as their primary duty. Even though there were continuous conflict among the paleyagars still they were continued the construction of tanks and the renovation of which are regarded as keredharma under the Karnataka tradition and culture.

Malnad area includes 1000mm to 3000mm rain and the rivers like Cauvery, Hemavathi, Thunga, Bhadra, Malaprabha and other includes the districts of Coorg, Chikmagalur, Shimoga, Uttara Karnataka, Dharwar, Belgaum, Hassan and other districts. Here the soil includes red soil and black soil and here grown the crops like paddy, spices sugarcane, coffee and others. Here the more rain expected and the total area of 8% was of agriculture in the coastal and Malnad territories. In few places we see the alluvial soil and remainings from the river.

Keladi rulers constructed more tanks around their capitals. Madaga masur Kere was constructed by Sadashivanayaka under the order of Sri Krishnadeveraya is still in good condition. This shows the engineering skills they adopted in the construction and maintenance. After the fall of Vijayanagara keladi nayaks, Chitradurga paleyagars, and the Mysore Wodeyars including Yalhanka nada prabhus constructed several tanks for the welfare of people and continued the tradition of Vijayanagara rulers.

Keladi at Sagar taluk referred to an inscription of 1573, of Ramarajanayaka refers that ' if Keladi setti or the merchants of keladi died without issues their properties may be owned by his brothers or blood relatives or the widow of the diseased and the remaining may be given for the construction of kere or kattes and also to temple construction. Thus public importance was given to this construction activity of Karnataka<sup>16</sup>. Another inscription of 1576 at Siddarayanakote in Chitradurga district informs us that the kere which was situated in the west of the village was broken and the matter was referred to Mahanayaka Charya (Hariti chief) by the village gowda, senabova and the people asked land for the renovation of the tank. They wanted to own the lands which are going to be irrigated. One Singaramma the drama artist constructed a tank and brought fame to that village which was named after her. This referred by the two inscriptions of 1599A.D <sup>17</sup>. A Nirganti (employee) who used to manage the tank irrigation at Sira taluk is referred in the inscription of Melukote in 1612 and it also further refers that the position of nadagowda a vassel. The disputes mainly referred to the appointment of an employee for the maintenance of tank <sup>18</sup>. Another inscription of Soraba taluk tells us that when the tank of Muguru agrahara was constructed by Sangisetti and kola was also dug. For this the land was given in some other place is referred here<sup>19</sup>. It also speaks how differently was to construct the tanks in new places. That means the land was not available for the tank construction. An inscription of Holur at Kolar district of 1620 A.D. speaks to one land grant was given to four Reddies for protection of land. It also informs that the people who failed in that duties, their land was taken back and it was given to some other person with the same purpose <sup>20</sup>.

Paleyagars of Chitradurga arranged for the supply of water to their capital and to irrigate the land around the palace. It was a wonderful system they have made. The rain fall on the Jogi Matti Hill runs and stored at Doddannanakere after filling water it went to Thimmannanayaka kere and Sannakere which were there under the hill. Afterwards the water used to released to DabaDaba and Vaddu reservoirs. After filling water to all these tanks water runs to around the fort. Likewise the rain water fell on the Meludurga or upper part of fort used to flow towards Gopalakrishna Honda of Akkathangera Honda, Sihineerina Honda of small types of keres or tanks. Afterwards the water flows through the underground of SantheHonda. For this reason only the fort of Chitradurga never seen the scarcity of water any time. <sup>21</sup>

The founder of Bangalore kempegowda scion was the architect of many tanks in Bangalore. Among these tanks Kempambudi tank was the most significant one. It is situated to north east side of Gavipura. This tank was constructed between the hills of and Gavipura. Kempegowda also constructed the Dharmambudi tank which is at present became the new bus stand. The water flows to Koramangala and from there to Aduodi and then it reached the tank at Chellaghatta. Even the water flown even after the place. Hence kempegowda constructed the Atchkut and a dam at Varatur. After this the water flows to the north Pinakini. <sup>22</sup>

Keladi Sadashivappanayaka constructed more than 14 tanks and among these tanks the foremost was the large tank or a hiriyakere is still in good condition and used by the large number of people. Besides the number of sources speaks that this

tank was never been dried up. The tank was known as Madagadakere is constructed under the supervision of Krishnadevaraya and the keladi rulers not only renovated this tank but also maintained so well that the repairs of this tank was undertaken by wodeyars of Mysore in the year 1863, which speaks about the technology of maintenance followed by the Fragmented polity rulers like the Nayaks of Keladi and other Paleyagars.<sup>23</sup> Col. Flaw fare says that the reservoirs of Europe in 1866 compared to Madagadakere they were very very small. Some of the officers of the administration used to appeal to their rulers to construct the tanks and reservoirs. Some time they were also used take up repairs of these tanks and the village headman and senabova and others appealed to the rulers they be permitted construct the tanks and they used to get the lands for the purpose.

Now we shall analyse the data from Kannada Kaifiyats related to keredharma. Arikutarada kaifiyattu referred to the emergence of a prosperous rural settlement in southern Karnataka. The present day Chamarajanagara was known as Arikutara. Its origin is interesting in the form legends. During the Vijayanagara period three nayakas or local chiefs migrated from Vijayanagara with 50 followers who were probably peasants. They were Doddabhadra, Veerabhadra and chandrashekara wodeyar. In the present day Chamarajanagara area they built their hut for their residence. They leased lands from the landowners of the area. The land was not fertile and only fit for cultivation of dry crops. Particularly Ragi, in the beginning. One day Veerabhadranayak was watering the ragi crops and also thinking of hunting the animals. Suddenly he saw a Hare, running after a dog, which entered the field of Ragi crop. This unnatural phenomenon led Veerabhadra nayaka to identify the land as Gandubhumi or heroic place. He constructed fort and tanks and facilities for agriculture. He called the settlement Arikutara or a village which was hostile to the enemies. Gradually more people migrated to this place and all were given lands for cultivation. The Arikutara Kaifiyat mention 24 villages attached to and they are in despair and the great extent of land immediately below the tank (reputed to be more than 20,000 acres) was covered by a dense date jungles, so that the vast supply of water afforded by this magnificent reservoirs flowed uselessly away to the river Tungabhadra near Harihar.<sup>24</sup>

Another legend is through some more kaifiyats. Yagati Kaifiyat refers to the construction of a large tank at that place located in kadur taluk of Chikmagalur district of Karnataka state. What is interesting is that is the keredharma in this place was undertaken by Kiratas, who were highway robbers and had accumulated money through their profession. On the advice of a saint they converted. The saint advised them to invest money in keredharma which would wipe out their sin and bring merit or punya in their next world. They pledged their faithful dog with a moneylender for some amount of money which was required to complete the tank construction. This kaifiyat says that the dog was killed by the Kiratas under the tragic circumstances and they only came to realize the innocence of their faithful Dog. However the kiratas completed their tank and named as Kokkasamudra after their Dog. Three idols depicting Kiratas, a faithful dog, and that of the money lender and his faithless wife were installed on the bund of the tank <sup>25</sup>.this is the finest example of Keredharma in Karnataka tradition during the present study.

Thus we may draw a few conclusions from the above study. Firstly the concept of keredharma was great force in the agricultural life of the people and during the reign of fragmented polity. Probably there was no dearth of finances for the construction of tanks, the people who accumulated wealth were motivated to undertake Keredharma as means of attaining Punya or merit in the other world. In this way the socio-religious value acted as an incentive to undertake constructive work in the rural economy. Secondly more than the state enterprises private enterprises were forthcoming for the implementation of Keredharma. Thirdly it is remarkable to note that kiratas and the courtesans did not lag behind in promoting keredharma. This speaks of the dominant position that keredharma occupied in the rural life of the Post\_Vijayanagara or Fragmented Polity period. Fourthly the myths and legends which are surrounded these Kaifiyats, Bhakairs and also the kadatas give us lot of information regarding the keredharma which became prime duty of the contemporary study period. Hence it is proved beyond doubt that the myths and legends in the form of Sthalapurana through kaifiyats helps the reconstruction of history. Lastly, Keredharma was widely implemented in Karnataka during the Post\_Vijayanagara period that a fragmented polity administrators helped in the construction of tanks by utilizing the services of monsoon waters and they have harvesting these in such a manner that their work appreciated and applauded by the scholars who have done research on this period particularly. Today we need to revive the Keredharma in the Monsoon region of Karnataka to motivate the rural folk may not be construct the new tank but to restore the old and the ruined tanks of the paleyagars period.

#### FOOT NOTES

1. Somashekar A. article presented at 16<sup>th</sup> conference 2000
2. Ibid p.1
3. MAR (1929) No.12. p.73
4. Bk II 183 Ec XI Tp.2
5. Ibid. 183
6. MAR (1909)IP Para 77
7. MAR(1940) No. 8
8. EC XII si 9
9. IA XI p.164
10. Appadorai A. Economic Conditions in Southern India 1000 -1500AD vol.1 pp208-9
11. EC VII sh. 30
12. Shivanna K.S. The agrarian system of Karnataka p.12
13. Kalburgi M>M Karnatakada kaifiyattugalu ( in kannda) pp 6-7
14. Ibid..
15. Hayavadanarao C –Mysore Gazetteer vol. v pp 1343-44
16. ibid..
17. Somashekar. A. Aithihasiak hinnele....pp23-25

18. Kalburgi M.M Karn Kaifi..p 112
19. kotresh Irrigation system ...p171
20. Puttanna M.S. Ikkeri Samsthan....
21. Venkatesh j ..Itihasa darshan 9 p. 143
22. Mysore and Coorg from Inscriptions
23. Mysore..a Gazetteer compiled by Govt. B.L.Rice
24. Karnataka state Gazetteer S.U.kamat Part I
25. Shivatatvaratnakara....Ed Shamasastri