

A historical analysis of land ownership and agroecology, in the erstwhile Mysore region of South India

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Introduction

Agriculture continues to be risky and unprofitable for the small and marginal farmers in India. In a booming economy based on neoliberal principles, their vulnerability and lack of safety nets often results in suicides and forced urban migration. While multiple studies explore the current economic and social causes for their susceptibility, this paper takes a historical approach to the issue. It presents the analysis of archives and literature related to agricultural policies, governance structures, land use and ownership across social categories in the erstwhile state of Mysore in South-India between the 19th and early 20th centuries to discern two related features of small holder agriculture in South India that could be causes for the continued vulnerability of socially marginalized small farmers against market and ecological risks.

These features are: a) the disruption of the regional economy wherein agricultural production and land use were tightly coupled with local food consumption and demand for raw materials from local industries and b) the introduction of administrative, economic and technological reforms (through British colonization), that resulted in small farmers from marginalized social groups being continuously at the receiving end of an exploitative relationship with the land owning elite.

Through the paper, we argue that a) a regional economy that is sustained through local inter-dependence between supply of agricultural produce, local culinary cultures and industrial production is a sustainable alternative for such small holders against the suggested solution of getting price signals from an agricultural produce market that is increasingly entangled in the global economy and b) the roots of vulnerability of such farmers are to be found in the historic discrimination met with them through the introduction of new regimes of land ownership, industrialization and modernization of the provincial states during the colonial period. And this could probably explain the small holder indifference generally prevalent in modern policies, suggesting what can fix rural-urban inequality and migration.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section provides a brief description of the study area together its socio-political-agrarian background. The next 3 sections describe the changes in the rural socio-political conditions of the area in three segments: pre-colonial phase, colonial phase and post-independent phase, together with summarizing the major shifts that affected the sustainability of small holder agriculture in the region. The last section summarizes the findings of the paper and presents the way forward.

The Mysore state and its Background

The erstwhile princely state of Mysore in South-India emerged as an autonomous province ruled by the Wodeyars after the fall of the Vijayanagar empire in the early 17th century. The princely state roughly covered the middle and southern districts of the present day Karnataka, including the commercial and production hub of Bangalore.

The princely state covered multiple agro-ecological zones, including with the hilly zones of the Western Ghats, transition zones, eastern and southern dry zones, all of which display a wide diversity of soil types, cropping patterns and agricultural systems. The hilly zones were characterized by Areca plantations, spice gardens and wetlands cultivating paddy. The transition zones and dry zones cultivated a variety of field and plantation crops, depending on the type of soil and irrigation sources available. The crops grown in these areas included Jowar, Ragi and numerous other millets and pulses, oilseeds, vegetables, fruits, mulberry and cotton. Wherever irrigation facilities are available, plantations with Arecanut and coconut, paddy and wheat are grown (C. H. Rao, 1927, pp. 70–72). These areas were also characterized by a network of small dams, tanks and irrigation canals built and meticulously maintained by the kings, local Palegars¹ and other gentry (Buchanan, 1807; Wilks, 1810; C. H. Rao, 1927).

The control of the land-locked state was taken over by Haider Ali and his son Tippu Sultan in the later part of the 17th century. After tumultuous decades of war with the British, Marathas and the Nizams of Hyderabad, Tippu Sultan was killed in 1799 and Mysore became a suzerainty of the British in the beginning of the 19th century. Parts of the province were lost to the Marathas, Nizams and the British Madras presidency (Wilks, 1810).

After Tippu's death, Wodeyars were reinstated as the royalty of Mysore. Purnaiah, a Minister under Tippu Sultan was appointed as Diwan² of Mysore for the first decade of the 19th century. Similar to the British practice in other princely states, a resident was placed in Srirangapattana, the capital of Mysore, who had considerable influence in the administration of the state. By this time, the influence and control of the Palegars spread across the Mysore state had begun to dwindle (P. B. R. Rao, 1944). The British took over the administration in 1831 owing to a rebellion in the Western Ghat region of the state. They ruled Mysore for the next 50 years and introduced western principles of administration in the state. The Wodeyars were reinstated back as the kings of Mysore in 1881³ and Mysore remained as a princely state till independence. They continued the processes of modernization introduced by the British. The structure of governance and administration of the princely state largely remained the same with the Diwans acting as operational links between the state and other provinces of British India (Manor, 1975; Chandrasekhar, 1985).

On the eve of Indian independence, Mysore was regarded as a benevolent modern bureaucratic state which encouraged industries, irrigation, higher education and the welfare of women and Dalits. The state had functioning departments for public works, irrigation, agriculture, horticulture, plant and livestock improvement, life insurance and public health. The progressive stances of the Mysore state: Women's education, industrialization and welfare policies were consciously cultivated strategies, to project an ideal image of the state towards the British and the national leaders of the Congress at the national/international media (B. I. Rice, 1908; Chandrashekar S, 2002).

Extremely conscious of their external image, the administrators of Mysore focused mostly on policies and political issues at the state level. The progressive and modern nature of the state was reflected in

¹ Palegars were feudal lords who paid tributes to the King and oversaw administration and revenue collection in the provinces under their control. They usually operated from fortified centers and governed their territory (including revenue collection, security, creation and maintenance of irrigation and other infrastructure) and maintained an army that would help in providing security to the province.

² A career bureaucrat, who acts as the Prime Minister and oversees day-to-day operations of the state

³ After the adopted son of the erstwhile king came into majority.

their attention on the development of urban areas, specifically of Bangalore and the establishment of modern industries. The influence of their social and welfare policies did not deepen down to the local level in rural areas of the state. Here, the legitimacy of their rule was driven through local patronage systems, which benefitted the rural upper caste elite, a modern manifestation of the old Palegar system. The local bureaucracy from the Hobli⁴ level and below were designed to work under their informal control and maintain status quo rather than ruffle the local power structure (Manor, 1975, p. 18).

In the decades following independence, this socio-political status-quo of the region continued although different welfare measures like land reforms and affirmative action were introduced (Manor, 1975, pp. 163–170). ~~Among the urban centers of the state, Bangalore became a hub of higher education, industries and the service sector. With the advent of liberalization, these sectors of the economy have boomed creating wide-spread regional disparities.~~

The diversity of administrative regimes ruling the state, the progressive policies of later regimes and more than a century of relative peace before independence make Mysore state a unique case to understand how these unique conditions influenced the local economy, the agrarian relations and land ownership across different socio-economic categories in the province.

Administrative structure, ~~agricultural practices~~ and land ownership in Pre-Colonial Mysore

The administrative structure of the Mysore province before British colonization roughly follows the Vijayanagar kingdom, which itself was structured as a conglomeration of semi-autonomous provinces (Burton Stein, 1982). In this system, administration can be described at three levels: the highest level of the kingdom ruled by the king himself, the intermediary level administered by either by Palegars or governors who managed the different provinces of the kingdom and the lowest level of the village, which was administered by the Ayagar/Baraha Baluti office (P. T George, 1970).

The King protected the province against invaders, expanded the empire and oversaw the rule of law in the kingdom. He would place a resident/governor in the provinces and collected dues from these provinces. Taxes and rents were extended to most social and economic transactions in the provinces (Saletore, 1934, pp. 142–225). The king controlled diplomatic relationships and trade alliances with other kingdoms. This involved negotiations with foreign kingdoms and large trade guilds (M. S. N. Rao, 1983). Other than broad rules of administration, the kings did not interfere in the provinces on a frequent basis. Occasionally kings would introduce new tax collection rates and systems which would be generally followed for extended periods of time later on. The amount of taxes collected were largely based on the permissible limits prescribed in the *Shastras*.

Palegars were responsible for internal security of their provinces and collection of revenue, part of which had to be given as dues to the king. Palegars also maintained their own armies which had to serve the kingdom during its wars. The actual influence of Palegars in their province and beyond its boundaries varied depending on their relationship and relative strength against the King and other aristocratic groups. The Palegars collected revenue through the Ayagar offices at the village level.

⁴ Hobli is a cluster of 20 – 30 adjacent villages administered at the Hobli headquarters through which tax collection, land records and other revenue department functions are operationalized.

The Ayagar was an officially recognized office setup in each village and consisted of 12 officials and the positions were generally hereditary. The functions of the Ayagar office were multifold. The collection of revenue from farmers, the maintenance of books of accounts of farmers, the description of farmers' land and their boundaries, the supply of water, implements and other agricultural inputs, and the functioning of other professions necessary for the village economy were regulated by the Ayagar office. The frequent wars and subsequent changes in rulers at the top level and the competition among multiple feuding Palegars at the intermediary level may have meant that Ayagar office had to deal with such changes frequently (B. L. Rice, 1897, p. 576). Thus, the Ayagar system was found to be working relatively autonomously from the events occurring beyond the provincial levels (Wilks, 1810, p. 117).

Within the Ayagar office, the Shanbhog and Gowda/Patel were responsible for maintenance of village accounts, revenue collection and law and order. The Shanbhog was generally of the Brahmin caste whereas the Gowda/Patel would belong to the dominant upper caste in the village (Lingayat/Vokkaliga/Nayakas). These two positions appear to be prominent even before the Vijayanagar empire (B. L. Rice, 1897, pp. 573–574). They coordinated with the officials of the state for the collection of taxes and other administrative duties. The other members of the Ayagar office were: Kammara (iron-smith), Badagi (Carpenter), Agasa (Washerman), Panchangi (Astrologer), Nayinda (Barber), Madiga (Shoemaker), Akkasali (Goldsmith), Toti/Taliari (Village Watchman), Nirganti (Waterman for tanks), and Kumbara (Potmaker).

The maintenance of the office of the Ayagars was provided by earmarked share for each official from the produce of the farmers. In general, the Shanbhog received the highest share of the farmers' produce/money statedly because this was an important position and required full time involvement, whereas the position of the Gowda/Patel has the highest political power and clout. It has to be noted that although the Ayagar office prioritizes the positions held by upper castes, the people of all castes in the village, including the professional castes as well as the untouchables had a role in Ayagar office and a specific say in the events of the village. For example, the Toti/Taliari office was traditionally held by an untouchable family and were responsible for ascertaining the boundaries of farms held by the people in the village and provision of village policing. The Nirganti position was also held by an untouchable household and was responsible for dividing the available water in the village tank among the farms (Buchanan, 1807, p. 389). Buchanan notes in detail the measurements of the total produce and monies given to these officials in different places of Mysore for their services to the village. Further, there were instances where these positions were given agricultural lands for hereditary ownership (similar to Inams⁵) to make sure that the livelihoods of the households in these positions could be sustained (Wilks, 1810, p. 118). The Ayagar system thus institutionalized the co-dependence of farmers and professional castes in the village economy. However, the relative autonomy of these local institutions, importance of the various positions within the Ayagar offices, the actual power of the different traditional castes and

⁵ Inam lands are typically lands gifted by the ruler for individuals and religious/service oriented institutions, for their service towards the state/king. The lands given like this were considered private property and were either free of taxation or had reduced taxes. These lands could range from a few acres to lands spawning multiple villages. The Inamdar (holder of Inam) was free to rent out his Inam lands to other tenants and collect dues from them.

hence, the relative ease of access to agricultural land among the traditional castes and untouchables has been a subject of considerable debate⁶.

In the Mysore state, all the lands in the province technically belonged to the king. Farming households could use their farming lands hereditarily as long as they paid the tax. The exceptions were Inam lands and plantations (mainly owned by Brahmin households), which were bestowed upon them by the King for their services and noble deeds and for their services in maintaining local temples. They either had no tax or paid reduced taxes. The taxation for field crops is based on produce. For plantations, the taxation is based on number of standing trees of the principal standing crop. For new lands, the taxes were subsidized in the first few years till the land become fully arable. The produce from a farmer would be divided according to the accepted norms of the province, wherein the Ayagar office took its share after which the government and religious institutions were given their share. The taxes given to the state for wetland crops (like Paddy and Sugarcane) were in kind, whereas for dryland crops, taxes had to be paid in money (Buchanan, 1807).

Buchanan notes that the taxes were fixed long ago in some provinces, by Kings and Palegars during the Vijayanagar era and these tax rates did not change. Similarly, the wage rates and barter measures were also fixed. Some regions in the Mysore kingdom had flexible taxes wherein, the Gowda/Patel negotiated the taxation rates with the Amaldar⁷ based on the agro-ecological conditions during the season.

Most farmers belonged to the upper caste households in the village. However, getting into agriculture was not very difficult for anyone willing to pay the tax for their produce (Kumar, 1965). Households of professional castes and other backward castes could resort to agriculture when their professions went through a lean patch. Further, in the drier tracts of the province, where intensive agriculture was not profitable, such households could cultivate small pieces of land. However, in the rich and irrigated tracts, the land ownership was concentrated among the more powerful groups (Kumar, 2005, p. 212). Thus, even though it is clear that land ownership was concentrated among the village elite, the literature on agriculture in the pre-colonial era point out to the possibility that disadvantaged groups too had access to agricultural land as a safety measure (Buchanan, 1807; Kumar, 1965; Frykenberg, 1969; Swamy, 2011). The literature also points at the flexibility farmers had in choosing between farming at different locations as well as pursuing other traditional professions.

Brahmins in the Mysore state owned plantations of Coconut and Betelnut and preferred not to work in the farms and employed laborers from lower castes. The exceptions were Brahmins from coastal and Western ghats regions. In these regions, land was private property. In these areas, Brahmin farmers did all the farming work except ploughing the land. Brahmin households in the plains preferred to work in white collar jobs. Their lands were generally located in the best locations in the village with some form of irrigation (either tanks or canals) which suited plantations (Buchanan, 1807).

Agriculture was labor intensive and farmers had considerable number of cows and oxen to help them in agriculture. Farmers believed that resting is harmful for the soil and ploughed the land multiple times

⁶ See (Burton Stein, 1982) and (Saletore, 1934, pp. 338–339) for conflicting perspectives on autonomy of local institutions in the Vijayanagar Kingdom, (L Alayev, 1982) and (B. L. Rice, 1897, pp. 641–643) for conflicting perspectives on the relative importance of the different personnel in the Ayagar office. (Kumar, 2005) and (Frykenberg, 1969) offer diverse perspectives of feasibility of land ownership by different social groups.

⁷ Amaldar is a bureaucrat at the Hobli level, responsible for tax collection

during the cropping season and cow dung was applied extensively. A typical farmer had 2 pairs of ploughs and oxen (for 2 ploughs) could till land 10 acres of dry agricultural land or 5 acres of irrigated land. He would have more than 20 cows, buffalos and sheep. Cows were reared for the purpose of providing dung which was extensively used as fertilizers for the land. The fodder for the cattle included a combination of Ragi and Millet straws mixed with husks of various pulses. Oxen were prized possessions and the fairs across the Mysore state were popular. The decisions on number of cattle to rear and breeds to be selected depended on multiple issues like availability of grazing land and fodder, ecological conditions and the need for farm yard manure for crops that can be grown in the area. The demand for milk and milk products was mostly limited to the upper caste households of urban centers. The dryland regions had a much diverse use of cattle, like provision of manure, fuel, soil preparation and weeding, lifting water for irrigation, threshing and transportation. In the ghats, survival conditions of cattle were less salubrious. The use of cattle was also limited due to the terrain of the area and the crop selections suited for the climate. The smaller variety of cows dominated these areas in large numbers.

The bullock trade was a thriving business because all the transportation of goods and people occurred through bullock carts. The cattle were taken to the village gomals (designated pasture areas) by shepherds and herders for which a tax was to be paid, depending on the number of cattle taken for grazing (Buchanan, 1807). Haider Ali and Tippu Sultan took special interest in developing local breeds (Hallikar and Amrith Mahal) which would become the backbone of their military transportation (B. L. Rice, 1897, pp. 199–202)

Buchanan documents the several combination of rotations and crop mixes across the Mysore state which shows that there was a large diversity of crops produced in the state. Depending on the prediction of rainfall, demand for crops in the local trade center, availability of cow-dung, nature of the soil and agro-ecological conditions, a diversity of crops were grown. In general, among the dryland field crops, wherever there was black soil (Eray Bhumi), Cotton, Jowar, Wheat (jave) and Corlay (millet) were grown. Wherever there was red soil (Kabbe Bhumi), Ragi and a diversity of millets and pulses were grown. In areas where irrigation was available, Paddy, Sugaracane, plantation crops and vegetables were grown. As Buchanan and Kumar note, such irrigated land was under the control of Brahmins and dominant caste groups.

Except for ploughing the land, women took part in farming activities extensively across all castes except for Brahmins. Among Brahmins, women didn't participate in agricultural activities. In other castes, women were in charge of rearing cows, cleaning their shelters, milking and feeding them and selling milk and milk products. Landless laborers mostly belonged to lower and untouchable castes and worked in the farms based on yearly arrangement of the *Jeeta* system. Their labor was generally hereditarily tied to the same lands. The male worker would have one heavy meal early in the morning and at the master's house and would be paid a certain amount, whereas the female worker would be given two meals, a set of coarse cloth and considerably less wage in comparison to the male worker.

The agricultural produce after being deducted for the shares of the state and the local Ayagar office was marketed in two ways: farmers would sell their produce directly to local traders and professional castes (like weavers) in the nearby small towns' weekly fairs or traders who would directly procure the produce from the farmers. The trade network was extensive across the state with multiple trading towns serving as collection centers for goods procured from farmers. These trading towns also housed industries that used the raw materials procured locally (like Cotton, Wool, Lac, Silk, Betel, Copra) and processed them

to be sold at local fairs for local consumers and for traders who would carry them to other trading towns. These traders also advanced money to farmers and artisans to buy produce from them in the next season (Buchanan, 1807).

The trading towns in the state were arranged on the most important trade routes between the Mysore state and its neighbors. Chitradurga (Woolen blankets), Davanagere (Cotton cloth), Sira, Gubbi Chikkanayakanahalli (Copra, Betel, Lac, Millets and Oilseeds), Tumkur (metals and lime), Devanahalli, Sarjapur, Agara (Cotton Cloth), Arasikere, Turuvekere, Tiptur (Coconuts, Copra, Jowar, Ragi), Nagar (Pepper, Betelnut), Srirangapattana, Mysore (Paddy, Jowar, Ragi, Sugar, Jaggery), Maddur, Channapattana and numerous other towns were centers where agricultural produce and raw materials were sold for traders and local consumers (B. L. Rice, 1897).

The cotton and oil mills near Bangalore (Sarjapur, Agara and others), the Jaggery units and cattle farms around Mysore and Srirangapattana, the wool weaving units of Chitradurga and the metal furnaces around Tumkur are examples of tightly coupled regional economies where in the local industries were dependent on agricultural production and local mines. The trading towns were not only centers of procurement and production, but were also links in the numerous trade routes visited by trader guilds that procured the unique local produce (like Pepper, Cardamom, Copra and coarse cotton cloth) and supplied them to places as far as Gujarat, Bengal and North India (Wilks, 1810). The trader guilds lobbied with provincial Palegars and Kings for security, reduction in taxation rates and were also involved in creating infrastructure in places suited for their trade (M. S. N. Rao, 1983).

By the end of the 18th century, Bangalore had developed into a big urban production and trading hub. It housed numerous cotton and oil mills and had permanent representatives of traders from these distant localities who coordinated the trade and transportation of goods⁸. The goods sold at various trading towns of the Mysore state was transported through the traders located here (Buchanan, 1807; Chandrashekar S, 2002). Subsidiary trades like Bullock trading and cattle feeds also thrived near these urban centers as visible from the numerous cattle fairs that happened in these urban centers as well as near-by villages. While farmers were not directly involved in the day-to-day affairs of such trading centers, they received price signals from local fairs where demand and supply were decided based on local consumption as well as external demand for their produce.

~~Thus, farmers were immediately affected by impacts of change in policies like Tippu Sultan's decision to ban trade with Malabar and Coorg, since these places bought the grains produced in nearby regions of Mysore and Periyapatna.~~

~~These trading towns were part of the formal economy of the kingdom and were significant in their contribution to the treasury of the state. However, these trading towns were also targeted by invading armies, rebel Palegars and mercenaries and were frequently looted for their wealth. As Buchanan notes, during such invasions, people often fled to isolated habitations which were too remote to even collect taxes or plunder.~~

⁸ The importance of Bangalore as a major trading center in the southern peninsula can be understood by the fact that Tippu Sultan's brief ban of trade with the Madras Presidency and the Malabar coast, created considerable financial loss in the province.

Shifts in land tenure and land ownership and agricultural practices during the colonial period

The death of Tipu paved the way for direct intervention of the British in the affairs of the Mysore state. With dwindling strength of Palegars and total control of the British, since early 19th century, the administrative machinery was largely run by the state bureaucracy. Through the 19th century, significant reforms were introduced in the state. These included the privatization and permanent settlement of agricultural land, stalling the arbitrary gifting of property to individuals, significant shifts in the procedures of administration and tax collection and the introduction of modern industries and new modes of transportation. These changes had crucial and long lasting impacts on patterns in land ownership, agricultural practices and regional economy.

Beginning with Purnaiah's regime, the Ryotwari system of land tenure⁹ became the norm for administering agricultural land in the state (P. T George, 1970, p. 123). Instead of the previous instances of agreement between the Ayagar office (specifically the Toti/Talliari) and the farmer, the government entered into a direct contract with the farmer which effectively gave ownership rights to the farmer over the land provided he paid the taxes that was assessed for the land. Under the British regime (since 1831), the taxes were fixed through a settlement for thirty years, based on the extent of the land tilled, the soil type and the irrigation method available. The settlement process was revised in the last 3 decades of the 20th century. ~~Where such settlement didn't happen, the farmers were issued yearly leases of land for which similar taxes were fixed.~~ Farmers claiming ownership of lands through the contracts with the government had different tenancy contracts with those who actually tilled the land. Similarly, the large variety of Inam lands¹⁰ also had different types of tenancy contracts with those who tilled the land. These lands were also subjected to assessment of taxes to be paid by the *Inamdars* (P. T George, 1970).

Impacts of land reforms

While the British land settlement attempted to introduce a homogenous regime of private land ownership at the policy level, the bureaucratic procedures at the grassroots became much more complicated. The loose decentralized system became centralized. The new system was difficult to enforce due to the various clauses in the settlement and the documentation necessary for establishing a direct contact between the state and the farmer. For example, P T George mentions that there were six type of government agricultural lands (besides Inam/Jagirs), within which, farmers had tenancy contracts with under-tenants, for whom there were 4 different types. Further, each province had a different set of nomenclature and procedures. There were several instances of claims of Inam lands for which there were no documentations. Further, as Anand Swamy notes, these complex procedures couldn't be enacted/enforced at the ground level without significant deviations because of the larger political need to compromise with existing landed interest within the state. It can be argued that such changes were introduced with the objective of creating secure property rights, ensuring good governance and contract enforcement, leading to economic growth and prosperity (Swamy, 2011, p. 7). However, these reforms had ramifications far beyond the expected outcomes on the ground.

⁹ The other two well known land tenure systems were: Zamindari and Mahalwari systems

¹⁰ The institutions of Inam and Jagir lands are complex topics that have their own socio-political history and are beyond the scope of this article.

The settlement process made the Shanbogh and Patel the most powerful people in the village because they became the eyes and ears of the government at the local level. The rest of the Ayagar positions became mere symbols and lost their importance. The limited administrative capacity of the Mysore Kings and the British at the local level (Manor, 1975; Chandrashekar S, 2002) and their priority towards stability over social justice (Manor, 1975; Kumar, 2005, p. 215) may have allowed for caste and patronage networks to emerge and create an uneven playing field wherein functionally literate farmers of dominant caste groups could legally garner ownership of agricultural lands that were in reality, tilled by farmers from weaker groups. Thus, these dominant groups became land owners whereas the other groups continued to till the land but became tenant farmers and agricultural laborers.

Further, the emergence of modern industries and increasing opportunities for the literate households to find jobs in the government sector resulted in these dominant caste groups to reinvest in land and agriculture in the rural areas (Manor, 1975; Srinivas, 1976). The first half of the 20th century witnessed educated Brahmins migrating into cities. This was followed by Lingayat and Vokkaliga migration to cities in search for better opportunities, which continues to this day. However, as M N Srinivas notes, land as a permanent asset was always a priced possession and hence, these migrated households did not give up their land. On the contrary, they invested in purchasing more lands as and when possible. While successive census documents of the 20th century raise the issue of absentee landlords, the 1951 census notes that agriculture was the primary profession in urban residents of Mysore (40.3% of the people) and Mandya (32.7%).

The period between 1911 and 1921 was also the time when the Non-Brahminical movement was gathering momentum in Mysore state. Rural elected representatives from Non-Brahmin upper caste groups were finding more and more positions of power as well as bureaucratic positions in the state (Manor, 1975; Chandrasekhar, 1985). Thus, it is highly likely that dominant groups like Vokkaliga and Lingayath farmers may have been benefitted from such government initiatives. For example, between 1911 and 1921, agricultural cooperative societies¹¹ sprung up in the state with government support. There were 111 societies in 1911 and they increased to 1500 by 1921. Similarly, from 9000 members, membership expanded to 92,000 in the same decade whereas transactions increased from Rs 4 Lakhs to Rs 78 Lakhs (C. H. Rao, 1927).

In conclusion, it can be said that after the settlement period, the balance of socio-political and economic power in rural areas shifted against the professional and backward caste households and they would have found it progressively difficult to access agricultural land. To control food prices and provide security against famines¹² and epidemics, the state began to invest in centralized storage, irrigation and railway networks¹³. Increasing access to goods across the nation, easy movement of agricultural produce, closure of existing cotton and oil mills in Bangalore and the focus on urban development meant that the importance of professional castes and other rural professions in the local economy began to be undermined.

¹¹ It can be inferred that these cooperative societies were largely composed of non-Brahmin members since Brahmin land owners had begun to migrate into urban centers.

¹² The Gazetteer of 1908 mentions that more than 1.25 million people (out of 5.33 million) died in the Mysore state.

¹³ Mysore had 590 KMs of railway line in 1891 which increased to 750 Kms in 1901. By independence it had crossed 1250 Kms (Gazetteers of 1908, 1927, Administrative Reports of Mysore)

The result of these dual issues could be seen in the loss of traditional livelihoods and dependence on agricultural labor/tenancy as the sole option for these communities. The 1927 gazetteer explains that among the caste of Madigas (untouchables), only one in twenty follow the leather profession and roughly one third are cultivators whereas 4/9ths are agricultural laborers. Among the Holeyas (another untouchable group) the majority were agricultural laborers. Similar trends can be observed through occupation patterns captured in census documents. The successive census documents of 1891 onwards indicate the declining trends among herdsman, shepherds, cotton weavers, tanners, oil press, rice pounders, barbers, washer-men and blacksmiths. The table below provides approximate numbers of people involved in indicative professions across Census documents.

Table 1. Occupation patterns of selected livelihoods in the Mysore Princely state

Year	Population	Shepherds Herdsmen	Cultivating Owners	Non-Cultivating Owners	Tenants	Agri Laborers	Cotton Weavers
1891	41.1 Lakhs	24737	29.55 Lakhs	65374	1.89 Lakhs	50,000	89759
1901	55.4 Lakhs	72000	27 Lakhs	342231	5.15 Lakhs	3.52 Lakhs	82000
1911	58.06 Lakhs	27000	31.5 Lakhs	171549	6.63 Lakhs	1.77 Lakhs	34000
1921	59.78 Lakhs	27000	37.21 Lakhs	177170	2.86 Lakhs	5.17 Lakhs	55000
1931	65.57 Lakhs	30000	37 Lakhs	54366	4.5 Lakhs	7 Lakhs	44000
1941	73.28 Lakhs	Not Available	42.99 Lakhs	55300	3.09 Lakhs	3.92 Lakhs	Not Available
1951	90.74 Lakhs	Not Available	50.33 Lakhs	262305	4.32 Lakhs	6.15 Lakhs	Not Available

Successive census documents provide clear patterns of lesser proportion of population being involved in professions like grazing, weaving, smithy etc. On the contrary, people earning livelihood through professions like carpentry, silk weaving, modern industrial occupations like mining and industrial work, and public administration increased. Census figures in these decades are severely affected by plague, famines and differences of interpretation of livelihoods and castes¹⁴ which have tended to obfuscate the trends (as noted by censuses from later periods). Further, the number of households recognizing themselves as Cultivating owners or tenants or non-cultivating owners have also been influenced by the respective land policy ecosystem, which itself underwent a rapid transformation in the early parts of the 20th century (P. T George, 1970).

The Census of 1951 also comments on the fact that increase in land ownership (non-cultivating land owners and absentee landlords) may have led to high agricultural tenancy, which was ironically reported about 150 years ago by Thomas Munro the Collector of the Coastal district of Kanara (and later, the

¹⁴ The Censuses of each decade experienced considerable amount of requests for change of professions and names through which castes were denoted. Further, categories of livelihoods through the periods have been redefined considerably through the Census decades.

governor of Madras Presidency between 1819 and 1827), where private ownership of agricultural land existed even before the British intervened. ~~The increasing trends in land ownership could be due to increase in population in already landed households as well as investment in land by other groups like the Banajiga (Lingayath) and Kunchatiga (Vokkaliga) sub-castes, who could have invested in agriculture due to similar pressures faced by other traditional castes (but with access to financial resources and caste network).~~

Further, the declining importance of the Ayagar office at the village level coupled with faster transportation facilities may have created adverse impacts on the food security and physical security of the village communities. Famines and epidemics were the major ecological threats against communities in the princely states of India. Strong local institutions could effectively lobby for discounting the payment of land taxes and rents in such times (Buchanan, 1807; Satish Chandra, 1982), which became difficult in the modern hierarchical bureaucratic state. Similarly, there are multiple instances wherein the practice of farmers storing surplus food grains like in underground bins could have prevented large scale famines (B. L. Rice, 1897, p. 564; Satish Chandra, 1982, p. 463). However, as the situation during the great famine of the 1870s show, the waning village police system (due to lack of compensation and retracting of Inam lands for Toti/Talliaries and takeover of their roles by Gowdas and Patels) couldn't have prevented the loot for food that ensued the famine (B. L. Rice, 1897, pp. 730–733).

In a society where caste was practiced as a strict form of differentiation and discrimination, and wherein the control of agricultural land was considered as a symbol of socio-political dominance (Srinivas, 1976), the reforms set in by the British interventions early on and vigorously adopted by the Wodeyars of Mysore, allowed the dominant caste groups to further strengthen their hold on ownership of agricultural lands and further strengthen and secure their socio-economic dominance at the local level. These dominant caste groups now had considerable land ownership and political influence in the fertile and resource rich tracts of the province. These areas also had the highest concentration of landless agricultural laborers since agricultural practices in these areas were intensive in comparison to other drier areas of the province (Kumar, 2005). The British preference for prioritizing irrigation and cultivation of Paddy as strategies for combating famines, the processes of industrialization and the continued appeasement of the rural elite for the purpose of stability, both by the British and the Mysore kings had made indelible shifts in the agricultural policy towards resource intensive agriculture that was not necessarily in alignment with the local agro-ecology and principles of sustainable agriculture. Thus, while the short run yields of such biased policies reaped economic benefits, in the long run, it could have had the deleterious impact of promoting commercial, resource intensive agriculture that focused on specific geographical locations and specific crops, thereby discounting other crops and marginalized communities involved in agro-ecologically consistent agricultural practices.

By the time India gained independence, revenue from agricultural land was no longer an important source of income for the government¹⁵. However, by this time, the dominant groups had firmly equipped themselves to utilize the varied opportunities and economic benefits that emerged with the modernization of the Mysore state. They were successful in creating more socio-political space for themselves at the local as well as provincial level, as well as making sure that the successive land tenure

¹⁵ Revenue from agriculture land in 1880 was about 65%. It was reduced to 30% by 1940 (Gazetteers and Administrative Reports)

policies and reforms of the Mysore state work to their favor. This trend continued even after independence and during the implementation of land reforms as well. In summary, on the eve of Indian independence, the traditional and backward caste groups were vulnerable and resource-deficient and were affected by three adversarial conditions: lack of access to agricultural land, dwindling livelihood options through their traditional professions and lack of socio-political power to enforce effective implementation of progressive reforms.

The evolution of land ownership and reforms after independence

After independence, Congress party, led by Nehru came to power at the Centre and in most states including Karnataka, Congress governments were formed. The numerous princely states like Mysore merged with the British provinces to form the nation of India. The bureaucratic setup of the country did not change and retained its structure and functions as they were during the colonial rule.

Congress was a large and heterogeneous political party which had people with different socio-economic interests. Economic development, modernization and industrialization were the main objectives of the Congress party at the national level. While the party was in principle, favorable towards abolition of Zamindari and giving the ownership of the land to the tiller, there were conflicting views with regards to this issue within the party. Many leaders of the Congress party involved in the freedom struggle and other political intermediaries at the grassroots level came represented the rural landed upper castes (Kohli, 1987, p. 72). While they were committed to the freedom movement, their commitment towards social issues like tenancy reforms were ambivalent. In an era when the party had to consolidate its position at the national level, it had to compromise with these local interests.

Hence, at the local level, irrespective of the party objectives at the national level, the landed elite and the old bureaucracy determined the local priorities. However, by the time of independence, abolishment of Zamindari system and reforms in agricultural tenancy were recognized as important issues that affected millions of farmers in the country. The awareness of farmers and tenants about the issue had increased and multiple associations at the state and national level had already been set up for advocating the cause of tenant farmers (Kulkarni D. K, 1992, p. 72) . The anticipation that eventually tenancy would be abolished and ownership of the land would be given to the tiller was high. The immediate demands of the tenant farmers were official recognition of their tenancy contracts, regulating tenancy terms and protection against cancellation of tenancy. However, landlords, Inamdars and Jagirdars also recognized such reforms would lead them to an eventual vulnerable position when tenancy is abolished. Eventually, although Inams and Jagirs were abolished, they continued to politically influential and held on to large tracts of land. They were able to secure their rights over much of their agricultural land by making sure that the official documentation reflected their legal control over the lands, whereas the tenant peasants did not have such capability. Further, they began to secure their most prized possessions and began to cultivate it themselves, using agricultural laborers rather than tenants (Chandrashekar S, 2002).

Thus, with the landed elite having control on the political leadership and bureaucracy, the farmers' protests and agitations like the Kagodu Sathyagraha¹ in Karnataka failed to address the interests of tenant farmers. The land reforms of Karnataka (including the abolishment of tenancy) introduced in the 1960s was limited in its success due to similar reasons. The pockets of success in providing ownership to tenants was restricted to the districts of South Kanara and Shimoga, where considerable number of

peasants had been mobilized before independence itself. Further, the tenants could get ownership of only the paddy wetlands, which were labor intensive and hence difficult for the land owners to cultivate on their own. Besides creating political momentum and consolidation of vote bank based on castes, these movements failed to address farmers' issues. In these initial agricultural movements, the interests of landless agricultural laborers and scheduled castes groups were not addressed and these communities had not joined the movement (Muzaffar Assadi, 2009).

While aspects related to land ceiling and transfer of ownership to tenants met with little success, the government was able to provide small patches of agricultural land to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households (together with Ex-Servicemen) through a process called Darkasth. The Darkasth lands were those cultivable waste lands that were either obtained through land ceiling, land near tank beds and open access lands identified in the village. There were stringent rules for protecting the ownership of these lands by the respective households. Together with population increase, the evolution of joint families into nuclear families and the aspiration of having landed assets¹⁶, the post-independence phase in India saw the fragmentation of landed assets and even among landed castes, the number of small holding farmers steadily increased.

With a myriad of issues coming under land reforms, the legal aspects of agricultural land ownership became complex. Disputes on land ownership, transfer of property and cases of violation of the protectionist regimes resulted in complicated and lengthy procedures for such disputes to be settled.

The government's development policy focused on a) Economic development through industrialization and modernization urban areas, b) Agricultural development through irrigation and adoption of green revolution technologies and c) Poverty alleviation achieved through welfare policies and affirmative action in education and public sector jobs. With strong centralized planning influence, these policy objectives were realized through agencies working in bureaucratic silos and thus pursued as seemingly disconnected objectives. While differential progress was achieved in these areas individually, the long term effect of such policies was the decoupling of the supply and demand factors in the regional economy.

Under centralized planning, urban centers like Bangalore became more and more cosmopolitan and their economic base shifted into the service and industrial sectors, through investment in public sector institutions. The outputs were mainly relevant for the national economy. With private capital concentrated in urban areas, the farming sector was heavily dependent on the government for provision of seeds, fertilizers, prices for their produce and capital investment in agriculture.

The government's efforts in the later part of the century was also centralized in its focus and prioritized on improving production technology in agriculture, through research and extension services and the provision of subsidized capital. Thus, the farmers' movements moved away from tenancy and ownership to other issues related to the demand for rightful output prices, procurement of agricultural inputs and equitable supply of irrigation water, electricity and subsidized capital.

These issues affected the irrigated agricultural tracts and farmers growing commercial crops like Sugarcane, Cotton, Arecanut and Paddy from these locations (Mandya, Shimoga, Belgaum, Dharwad and Bellary). Their voice became more and more vocal in the later farmers' movements. Thus, farmers

¹⁶ Not only for themselves, but also for their descendants (Srinivas, 1976, pp. 110–112)

associations like the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS) formed in the 1980s began to focus on issues related to specific commercial crops like Sugarcane, Cotton, Paddy, Mulberry and Arecanut rather than the holistic issues affecting farmers and agricultural laborers. While attempts were made to form a single front to unite the cause of farmers, Dalits and other issues, such attempts haven't been successful since the objectives of the diverse groups are either too different or mutually conflicting in nature.

Thus, in the recent years, the main issues on which associations like KRRS have agitated are: provision of low interest agricultural loans, strategies used for loan recovery, payments to farmers towards crop losses, support prices, the control of agricultural markets by agents, the insensitivity of government officials and politicians w.r.t farmers, irrigation mechanisms, irrigation schedule, power subsidy, import and export tariffs etc, whereas the issues of agricultural laborers are taken by other groups like workers associations and Dalit associations.

Summary and way-forward

The above sections briefly summarized the evolution of agricultural land ownership in the erstwhile state of Mysore. The agrarian systems before colonial intervention was tightly coupled to the regional economy through a network of trade and production cities spread across the state and connected by trade routes. We argue that this regional economic model, although significantly discriminatory and socially static, had more possibilities for equitable access to agricultural land and provided diverse economic options for the livelihood of vulnerable communities. Changes induced by British colonization together with new regimes of land ownership, industrialization and modernization of the provincial states brought an end to this regional economic model. It resulted in the privatization of agricultural land, capital accumulation in urban centers and a consumption economy disconnected from its provincial agricultural systems resulting in agriculture being non-profitable, dependent on welfare measures and made the agro-ecology vulnerable. This in turn compromised food safety, nutritional balance, soil fertility and made food security dependent on imports rather than augmented and consistent productivity, for avoiding inflation and famines.

The diminution of traditional land tenure and local administrative regimes led to new opportunities for rural elite and the educated upper castes to invest their economic surplus and use their bureaucratic and political influence to amass agricultural land which exacerbated the conditions of landlessness among laborers from certain social groups and traditional professional castes. Thus, on the eve of Indian independence, with the loss of access to land and other physical assets and with outdated professions, these communities suffered significant setback in the emerging independent nation. They became either landless laborers or tenant farmers and were at the receiving end of an exploitative relationship with the land owning communities.

The tenant farmers had to fight against the interests of the landed elite, who had by the time of independence, accumulated socio-economic as well as political capital and had permeated into local bureaucracy and democratic institutions. Thus, agrarian movements and policies towards equitable land distribution have had limited successes, even in the presence of a state government that wanted to implement effective land reforms. The ensuing policy focus on centralized planning, intensive agricultural practices and urban centric economic growth made it difficult to drive the attention back to strongly coupled regional economic models, which could have provided better opportunities for the

landless and small farmers to use the opportunities provided by a growing economy and move up the socio-economic ladder.

With the advent of neoliberal globalization since the last three decades, new formulae of differentiation among farmers have emerged. Farmers having the continued advantage of proximity with the socio-political elite are able to sustain resource intensive industrial forms of agriculture by tapping into state resources, fiscal incentives and subsidized capital. Thus, the majority of farmers, both the political elite and the deprived continue to be dependent on direct and indirect government subsidies on capital and agricultural inputs. However, it is the local elite who are able to take advantage of the new niche markets for high value agricultural products, both national and global. The small and marginal farmers are not only exposed to vagaries of the agricultural produce markets (which are influenced increasingly by the global economy) but are also dependent on the limited administrative capacity of the government to translate its policy objectives into fruitful action on the ground. Thus, their position continues to be vulnerable and their future uncertain.

Hence, although patterns in land ownership have become less skewed since independence and democratic decentralized institutions of governance exist, agriculture is still risky and unprofitable for the historically disadvantaged groups hugely represented in the small land holdings.

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ⁱ The Kagodu Sathyagraha was the first agitation in independent Mysore state, by tenants against the land owner in independent Mysore state. The peasants involved in the agitation were all from the Deeveru caste (a backward caste whose traditional profession was tapping toddy) against a Lingayat landlord household. The land owning Lingayat family was very influential in the district. They were Congress party leaders involved in the freedom struggle. The oldest sibling of the family, Gurubasappa Gowda (also known as K G Wodeyar) went on to represent the constituency 2 times in the Parliamentary elections. The family owned nearly 1400 acres of agricultural land, most of which were paddy wet lands. Other than a mere 18 acres of agricultural land (6 acres of betelnut plantation and 12 acres of wetlands), the entire land owned by the family was given to more than 200 local tenant families for cultivation. The rent paid by the tenants varied between 1/3rd and ½ of the produce. The landlord's control on the tenants was much more than the tenancy contract since everyone in the village was dependent on the family. Only one other Deeveru family in the entire village had their own agricultural land.

The tenant farmers although illiterate, were already mobilized due to the presence of active peasants' associations. What began as a protest against the use of arbitrary measures for collection of grain from tenants in

1951 soon took turn into a fight between the Deeveru peasants and Lingayat landlords. The landlord cancelled the contracts with the tenants and asked for police protection for his agricultural land. The tenant farmers with the support of the local peasant organizations defied the orders and tried to cultivate the land. They were arrested for trespassing and as many as 1500 cases were booked in a few months. The agitation gathered national attention and socialist leaders like Ram Manohar Lohia also visited the movement. The government intervened and leaders from Congress and Socialist Party arrived for coming up with an amicable solution. As months passed, the peasants began to lose interest. The agitation was termed as a caste confrontation between Lingayats and Deeveru since the local Dalit landless laborers did not lend their support to the peasants. Similarly, no landlord of other castes lent support to the landlord. The agitation soon lost interest. The police cases against the peasants and members of the peasants' association were taken back and ended the sathyagraha. Within a year of closure of tenancy and no alternative livelihoods, the tenants returned to the landlord and agreed to all his clauses.