

## THE LAST RAJAS OF COORG

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THE Rajas of Coorg were valuable allies of the British in their campaigns against Tipu and were therefore treated with consideration in the arrangements drawn up at Seringapatam in 1799. The Raja claimed certain districts which his troops had appropriated during the confusion, both in Mysore and in S. Kanara, but the Duke of Wellington wrote about the final dispositions (*Despatches*, Vol. I, pp. 320, 321): "Under this arrangement he will have nearly 24,000 *Canterai* pagodas per annum which is about the value of the sum which the Company have annually saved by his forbearance to demand payment of the money due to him: he will have two districts in Canara to which he conceived he had a claim and certain other districts in the same province, connecting him with the Bantwal river, of the same value with districts in Mysore which he is desirous to possess but which under existing circumstances, it is not possible to grant him." Dooda Viraraja was very much disappointed, however, with these concessions and grumbled against them until his death in 1809. He left behind him only four daughters, the eldest of whom, Devammaji, "abdicated her sovereignty in favour of her excellent and loving uncle, Lingaraja, who supplanted her with the sanction, or at least the connivance of, the East India Company. When he passed away in 1820, the party of the Princess could not oust from the throne his son Virarajendra. This Raja presided over the destinies of Coorg until 11th April 1834, when Col. Stuart Fraser annexed Coorg to the Company's possessions, announcing by Proclamation that, Virarajendra had been guilty of the greatest oppression and cruelty towards the people subject to his government. Trother (V, 205) says that the condition of Coorg about 1832 was as bad as imagination could have pictured it.

Mill, however, takes a different view (IX, 358) which invites investigation. Speaking of the Coorg War he says, "The spirit displayed by the inhabitants of Coorg in their resistance to a force which for its numbers and discipline might have been expected at once to have overwhelmed an indisciplined and imperfectly armed handful of barbarians and the success with which they repelled the attacks of so many of the divisions were highly creditable to their nationality and might suggest a suspicion that the Raja was less unpopular than had been represented."

At the Record Office, Mercara, Coorg, there are vast collections of more than 2,000 manuscript letters in Kannada, copied in registers, as and when they were issued or received from the Diwan Katcheri to and from the various officers of the State from 1810 to 1830. There is also a copy of the *Hukum Nama* of 1811, in some respects different from that translated by Curgenvén. There are records of the comprehensive survey of Coorg carried out in 1812 and consulted even now for evidence of land rights. There are also details of the salaries of the staff of the Palace establishment and of the officials of the Civil and Military departments. My close study of these documents and of some contemporary descriptions of Coorg made by the officers of the East India Company and of the *Manual of Coorg* written by Rev. Richter in 1870, has convinced me that the aspersions of personal cruelty and gross mismanagement cast on the last Rajas of Coorg are, to say the least, overstatements.

Though the Haléri dynasty was a non-Coorg Veerasaiva family, the Manuscript Letters reveal the truth of Lieutenant O'Connor's statements, made after his survey of Coorg during 1815-1817, "Though the Chief is of the Siva-bucter tribe, the religious institutions belonging to his faith are confined to a very small number and those but poorly endowed. A few insignificant mattoms in Elusavirasime, one at Mahadevpoor and another at Madikeri, are the only establishments of this nature" and "Every place of responsibility is held by the Coorgs" (*Memoirs of Codagu Survey*, I, 42). In fact, out of a list of revenue officials for the year 1815, there are only 4 non-Coorgs out of 40. In 1828, Viraraja issued an order asking local officers in every *nād* to prepare lists of all Coorg boys who were both strong and intelligent so that "they may be trained for the Government services in which they are needed".

The first task of the Rajas after the convulsions of the wars with Mysore was the resurrection of their kingdom. The dynasty was at least three centuries old upon the throne and was therefore fit for the leadership of the people. Tipu had transplanted Coorgs in Mysore and Malayalis and Kannadigas in Coorg. The entire economic structure was therefore out of gear. Curgenvén gives as No. 13, a *Hukum* of 1811 in which every inducement is held out to settlers and cultivators to bring more lands under the plough. *Hukum* 26 encourages vegetable gardens and orchards. The Rajas brought in people from the West Coast and constructed Pettahs or Bazaars and instituted fairs to promote trade and facilitate exchange. They discouraged polyandry, provided people with 'circar wives', *i.e.*, 'female captives,' women escheated to the Chief, and slaves, and prevented emigration—all with a view to populate the devastated land. Muslims from Hospet,

Vokkaligas and Settis from Mysore, Christians from Seringapatam, carpenters and blacksmiths from Malabar were all encouraged to settle in Coorg. A letter from the Palace dated 1812 shows the grave concern of the Raja at the flight of a few of these settlers on the plea that the allotments of land were too small to be economically beneficial. Rules are laid down in another *Nirūpam* for the demarcation in every fresh settlement of roads and paths, kitchen gardens, grazing lands, and forest plots for green manure and fuel. Constant reminders are sent to local officials that they should not pester the ryots, even if they behave rudely, lest they desert the land.

Hukum 2 (Curgenvén) gives the general principles of revenue levy and collection : "Collect revenue with the discretion and diligence due to the palace but do not, on that account, oppress the people. Do not collect more, thinking that thereby you gain the favour of the Raja." Lingaraja, described by Rev. Richter in his *Coorg Manual* as 'a man of naturally savage temperament with a passion for gold and blood,' says in the *Hukum Nama*, translated by Curgenvén, "the *Dharmasastra* says 'take one-sixth'; but I will take only one-tenth." O'Connor writes (II, 30): "In nothing is this principality more remarkable than the extreme lightness of its land tax"; "There is a great spirit of regularity and order discernible throughout the interior arrangements of the State"; "The revenue realisation is easy and sure."

Of course, this was made possible by the fact that the Coorg Government was a big commercial corporation, having the monopoly of the sale of timber, cardamom, honey, bees-wax, ivory and other forest produce. The palace also held extensive farms called Panyams cultivated by means of slave labour and the compulsory labour service of Coorgs holding land on hereditary tenure. Hundreds of the manuscript letters deal with exemptions from this obligation of free labour and the transfer, sale or gift of palace slaves. The palace was a great centre of economic activity and almost all the export trade was concentrated there. Means of communication were kept in good repair and the frontiers were guarded against smugglers with strict vigilance. "The boundary is known with the greatest exactness and preserved with the utmost solicitude; a small path runs along it for nearly the whole circuit. Guards are placed at short intervals for the particular purpose of preventing intrusion" (O'Connor I, 3).

As we peruse the letters despatched during the stress and strain of day-to-day administration, we are struck by the strength, impartiality and efficiency of the administration. Curgenvén tries to explain the inconsistency of a 'wicked king' carrying on an 'impartial government' by saying 'the

conclusion which presents the least difficulty is that the Raja was content to enjoy the less onerous prerogatives of a ruler and left to others the task of ruling,' (*Introduction*, iii). The letters, however, show that the Raja did not leave to others the task of ruling. We find that sometimes he gets impatient of the tangles of red-tapism and the smothering heap of queries and explanations that gather quickly around even insignificant points. We can see him intervening to save a situation from the evils of further procrastination. We can find him restraining over-enthusiastic subordinates, as when in 1824, he wrote, "Do not overwork the peasant, if you desire our approval and appreciation. Know that the ryots are the government's treasure, though they are outside the vaults of the treasury." In 1826, he writes to the Dewan not to compel people to offer *Nazar* to him. Whenever a good deed is done, or whenever an officer assumes or relinquishes a post, the Raja is ready with his message of encouragement. He is the first to console them when they suffer loss or bereavement. In the manuscript letters from 1810 to 1830, the Raja is found deeply solicitous about the welfare of his officers and subjects.

Hundreds of complaints and cases which were judged by the Raja and his subordinate officers and the caste councils and village headmen are detailed in the *Nirūpams* that were sent out of the Diwan Katcheri. Hukum 20 describes the judicial machinery which lasted from 1800 till the annexation of Coorg in 1834. "If the matter is trifling, the village patel will listen to the complaint privately and sympathetically and settle it. If it is beyond his power, he will send him to the Takka (elder) and if the Takka feels it too heavy a burden, he shall send the complainant to the Nād Parpathigar with an account of the facts. If the Parpathigar feels unequal to the task, let the complaint come before the Dewan Katcheri. There, four men of good sense and repute shall be chosen as arbitrators, presided over by some officer and the matter shall be presented before them. The decision of the arbitrators shall be final" (Curgenvén). The administration of justice was sagacious and simple. Sentences of whipping and mutilation were reserved for repeated offences and major crimes. There is noticeable in the *Nirūpams* a readiness to pardon, or at least to postpone, punishment. For most offences, like speaking ill of government, brawling in the street, discourtesy to officers, petty cases of smuggling and theft, the order from the Diwan Katcheri was invariably, "Give them a sound thrashing with your tongue."

It is plain that the administrative machine reconstructed by Doddaviraraja continued to function during all the years covered by the volumes of orders and letters. Even after the annexation, Col. Fraser had to build up revenue and justice on the old foundations.

Some explanation has, finally, to be sought for the obvious paradox that a beneficent system of government was being maintained by corrupt and bloodthirsty kings. First of all, we have to admit that the ghastly stories of executions and tortures that have gathered round the memories of the last three Rajas of Coorg can well be exaggerated versions of a few actual cases. The explanation given by Curgenven (Introduction iii) that though the head was mad, the limbs were sane, seems rather too far fetched.

The Rajas of Coorg from 1800-34 appear to have lived and carried on their work in the midst of intrigues and plots, for and against the succession of other members of the royal family. Hence in pure self-defence, they sometimes struck blows in the dark, unable to distinguish friend from foe. The Rajas were also apprehensive of the motives and movements of their British allies. General Welsh writes, as early as 1812, "It struck me that the Raja had imagined that the British were going to declare war against him and that he was consequently fortifying his country." (quoted by Richter, p. 309). Lieutenant O'Connor by his survey of Coorg between 1815-17 did nothing to allay this nervousness. The example of Mysore where the Raja was deprived of ruling powers in October, 1831, was none too encouraging. In 1832, Virarajendra's sister and brother-in-law fled to the Mysore Residency. The stage was therefore set for what Richter calls (p. 312) Viraraja's 'paroxysms of darkest suspicion' and for a series of intrigues and counter-intrigues in the palace at Mercara. But, in spite of his cruelty to his political enemies, Viraraja appears to have been popular till the last. Rev. Richter says (pp. 335-36): "The leaders of the Coorgs . . . were true enough to their words and took up their posts at the different passes where they might have defended themselves most effectually . . . But, . . . incited partly by hope that a reconciliation was yet possible, partly by fear that he might lose all if matters went to extremities, he (the Raja) sent orders prohibiting his Coorgs from encountering the troops of the Company, hence the easy advance of the latter." The Raja therefore seems to have been obeyed by his subjects even in the direst days of invasion.