



Contemporary Agriculture Issues from Dakshina Kannada: A Field View

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Abstract

This paper was written as a part of my PhD dissertation on the Karnataka Organic Farming Policy implemented by the Government of Karnataka in 2004, where I have interfaced between the policy- project and narrated the existing constraints of the development project in village level. A village is a powerful idea for analysis in social science discipline, as it gives the researcher an opportunity to explore the socio-economic, political, cultural dynamics of the society. It brings out the interconnected and intra-connected dynamics between the communities, social structure and peripheries of the communities. The villages have their own historical, cultural narratives and they create an interesting 'field' for an anthropological enquiry for exploring the agrarian society. Through an ethnography approach, I try to narrate the existing contemporary agriculture issues in Dakshina Kannada. The explorative study tries to understand the agriculture issues of Bettadka village in Dakshina Kannada district and reflects on development and agriculture from the region.

Keywords: Agriculture, Dakshina Kannada, field view, ethnography approach.

Introduction

Towards the West of Mysore, locate a thin strip of land stretching down to the costal Arabian Sea, namely South Kanara (present-day Dakshina Kannada) in Karnataka. Geographically, Dakshina Kannada is a Southern coastal district of Karnataka with an area of 4,559 sq. km. The district is about 177 km, in length and 40 km in width at its narrowest and about 80 Km at its widest part. This costal landscape abounds in vegetation such as evergreen and semi-evergreen forests, mangroves, beach vegetation, planted groves of trees, horticulture gardens, agricultural fields, grasslands, household gardens. Dakshina Kannada population is a heterogeneous mix of different religious, castes and classes. It has a population of 2,083,625 of which 1,032,577 and 1,051,048 are male and female respectively¹. The average literacy rate in 2011 is 88.62 compared to 83.35 of 2001. In this male literacy is 93.31 and female literacy is 84.04. In sex ration the district is has 1018 female per 1000 male in 2011 as compared to 2001 census figure of 1022. Dakshina Kannada is considered as a 'progressive district' as per the Human Development Index (HDI) and ranks high with regard to the HDI, Gender Development Index (GDI), sex ratio, female literacy, and agricultural wages for women². Socio-economic and ecological divergence adds to the *cultural heterogeneity quotient* as compared with the rest of Karnataka. Within the district, heterogeneity exists between regions, as villages are different from each other in their geographical patterns, variations in political hegemony, caste supremacy and modern *versus* traditional values etc.

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the socio-economic, political, cultural dynamics of the society. It brings out the interconnected and intra-connected dynamics between the communities, social structure and peripheries of the communities. Villages have their own historical and cultural narratives as they create an interesting 'field' for an anthropological inquiry exploring the agrarian society. Dakshina Kannada agrarian history through ethnography approach gives an insight into the changing agrarian social structure and their functions in the society.

Dakshina Kannada villages

Writing, observing, or even criticising the village is a difficult task because of the inbuilt complexities. Dakshina Kannada villages are complex in their character, as they are rather modern in comparison to other Indian villages and often give the image of small town. Majority of the villages in the district are socially and economically advance; people are politically conscious and aware of development activities. Commercial agriculture has created capital among farmers and importance given to education has brought divergent group of youths into trade, commerce and service sector. The significance of village geography is the sacred groves locally referred, as 'bana' (a protected land), 'nagabana' and 'Bhootasthana' are the worship places for communities and families. It is a stretch of landscape within the village, agricultural land symbolise a secular, sacred culture and traditional practices of the people linked with the biodiversity of the region. It has created different geographical divisions within the ecological and cultural affinity of the people as it varies in terms of size, ownership patterns and vegetation. Sacred geographies have created physical spaces for castes like Bunts, Poojaris, and Brahmins, which is beyond the modern demarcation of the village and has socio-political

significance in the religious contexts. Concisely, village is a unit within the larger society which includes production, identity, administration of the community and it has inter and intra relationships within the society, which becomes the base for rural life. The dispersed feature of the district has created 'individual spaces' within the village geography, community, families, and people. In the villages, houses are scattered around the village giving the impression of different settlements with farmers residing in their own agricultural land with livestock. Each house has its own source for water like wells, ponds or recent addition of bore wells. This kind of a dispersed settlement does not facilitate socialising within the community unless the farmer chooses to visit the village centre. Each farmer resides within his agricultural land and creates own world away from the village and community. This style of living provides personal space and individual life styles. Individual spaces in the region have created physical, social, cultural and emotional isolation of households. The isolation of the human settlement within the village has contributed towards the feeling of detachment of the villagers from participating in the day today activities of the community.

Bettadka Village

Bettadka, at first glance, gives the image of a sleepy town just awakening and shedding its traditional social structure and slowly embracing modernity in its social sphere. My stay as a researcher in the village soon changed my perceptions and could see the socio-cultural heterogeneity of the locality. The original, historical past is unknown even though people have resided here since time immemorial. The different narratives describe the socio-economic and political arrangements of the society and post independent social transformations in social structure and glimpses into the secular symbolic dimensions of social practices of the village. This village is a gateway between Karnataka and Kerala as it exists on the periphery and a road passes through the village that geographically connects both states. The socio-economic life of the Bettadka has expanded beyond village boundaries as many people have family and kinship ties with the people residing in other villages beyond the boundaries of Kerala.

Bettadka is predominantly a dispersed village; slowly converting into a small town. In terms of the village infrastructure, the region is 'developed' as compared to the neighbouring villages. People access the neighbouring towns by public and private road transport services. It is the centre for education, health care, transport and agriculture market in the region. Many nearby villagers come here for their businesses and related activity. Dakshina Kannada has many such small 'developed villages' within its geography. Bettadka has a total of 351 acres of agricultural land and 484 acres of *kumki* land (It is the government land which is situated within the boundary of *patta* land where the landowner has rights to stay, use the resources). As per the Karnataka Land Reform Act, person can stay in this land; however, they do not have the freedom to

change the existing structure of the land. Bettadka is a stratified village based on class, caste, access to land and resources. Bettadka village is a dwelling place for castes, sub-caste religious identities and majority of the castes and communities follow the matriarchal family tradition.

Agriculture in Bettadka

Agriculture consists of relationship between those who control the land and those who use the land³. Those who control the land will have the property and capital ownership over the land, but the extent of this ownership varies. The introduction of land reform in Dakshina Kannada district has rearranged the social order as majority of the service class people who worked as tenants in the rich farmers land, became 'farmers' with land reform and it has created the 'small farmers' category in the agrarian society. The discussion below gives an insight of what happened over the course of time in agriculture from pre-independent to contemporary world.

Paddy is the staple food as more land in the region was under paddy cultivation during the pre-independent time. However, situation isn't the same today, as farmers now are concerned about the decline in the paddy cultivation. During the Focus Group Discussion, a paddy farmer Krishna expressed his apprehension about the present condition of farming and narrated factors that have contributed in the decline of paddy farming in Dakshina Kannada. According to him, the introduction of Land Reform Act in 1960s has contributed in the decline of paddy as big land- owners had to give away the land to the labourers who were tenants in the paddy lands. The long stretch of paddy fields from the village slowly disappeared and this change did not happen overnight but was continuous. The various factors are responsible for farmers' disinterest towards the paddy cultivation. Lack of labourers for ploughing, transplanting, harvesting and crop related diseases have made farmers to opt out from this cultivation. Farmers also discussed that increased cost of production for rice and low productivity of the land, the existence of laterite components in the soil has led to the poor performance of paddy cultivation in the district. The existing condition of the valley and hilly area make it more favourable for perennial crops. Land fertility was not favourable for paddy, as farmers had experienced loss in the paddy cultivation over the years and heavy sporadic rainfall has made it difficult for the farmers to control pests in paddy cultivation. The traditional, local, disease resistance paddy varieties like *kayame*, *rajakayame*, *kaje-jaya* and high yielding varieties like *mukti*, are used in the paddy lands. The introduction of HYV seeds has replaced the traditional local variety of seeds. Many reasons have contributed for this shift as State Agriculture department pushed HYV seeds by distributing in the village level through agricultural extension workers.

Rajanna, an 80-year-old farmer explained as how farmers came to know about the government HYV seeds in the village. According to him, Gram sevaka (agriculture extension worker) introduced

the farmers to modern seeds and manures. While visiting the village, he carried a bag full of seeds and distributed to the farmers. Soon farmers realised the impact of the HYV seeds as plants became easy targets to pests and use of pesticide became part of the cropping pattern in the region. Over the years, farmers have observed the different *guna* (features) in HYV and local variety of seeds. They found that, local varieties were tastier, big in size, heavy in weight and farmers receive more fodder than crops. Fodder provides food for the animals and again farmers do not have to spend on purchasing the fodder from the market. While, HYV seeds are smaller in shape and less in weight and more crop and less fodder for the animals.

In 1970s, the region observed demand for cash crops, as prices gradually increased in the market. In this process, many farmers introduced commercial crops in their agricultural land, which gave profit for the first time and they observed that cultivating arecanut was easier than paddy. In this region, arecanut cultivators gave maximum interest for the development of arecanut production in the district. The transformation has happened over the decades were farmer gave maximum attention to plantation lands, old unhealthy plants were replaced by new plants and new plots of areca nut plantation were formed and vast paddy lands were converted to arecanut plantations. The land for tiller, land reforms, cooperative farming, and controlled land holding etc have contributed in the development of plantation farming in the region. Land reform policy in the district had adverse effect on the landowners as majority of the paddy areas were existed under the tenants. During the implementation of the policy, many paddy lands were transferred to tenants by the state government as these policies and laws were applicable to paddy lands (land for tiller, land reform acts) and not for plantation lands. Understanding the loopholes in the policy, farmers prior to the implementation of land reform converted their paddy land to plantation agricultural land. In the meantime, modern mechanisation and farm practices, chemical fertilizers, pesticides HYV seeds were introduced in the region.

Basavappa, a farmer with one acre of paddy cultivation and 2 acres of plantation farming explained the significance of bull in ploughing the farmland. According to him, only a trained person could plough the land, as it requires the skill to manage the bull

and hold goad together, and make the bull to pull the plough in a straight direction. In this farming, there existed a co-operation and silent bonding between the farmer and bull. While ploughing the land, bull became the silent listener as he shared all his worries. On the other, farmer uses plenty of water in the paddy field to help the bull to feel comfortable to pull the plough hard and deep inside the soil. In the traditional ploughing practice farmer, bull, plough and nature were involved and holistic approach was involved in the traditional practice of paddy farming. Until, 1970s many famers had used bullock for ploughing the land. The mechanisation in paddy farming has pushed farmers to shift their ploughing technique from the bullocks to power tiller farming in the village. With the wooden plough farmer had to till the land six to twelve times and with the coming of power tillers the task reduced to two to three times. Traditional wooden ploughs and bulls are almost extinct from the Bettadka and only a few families still preserve wooden ploughing equipment. Power till has reduced the farmers' dependency on labourer for paddy cultivation.

Seasonal nature of the agricultural occupation, production links with the agro-climatic conditions and delay in the crop production has its influence on quality and quantity of crops. Shortage of workers, work intensity, weather, low output returns over the years has shifted the land use patterns, farmers shifted from paddy to horticulture crops. Scholars, practitioners' agriculture officials have shown concern and presently we have 32,437 (2010) hectares of paddy land compared with the 2009 (32,583) and 2008(32,845) statistics showing declining trends in paddy cultivation⁴. In the Bettadka, less than 10 % of the farmers are practising paddy cultivation and they have preserved the paddy fields as food security for the family. The existing condition of agriculture has pushed farmers to cultivate a single crop in a season; however, it is not sufficient to meet the annual demand of food consumption in a family. Significantly, from the last decade, agriculture has undergone wide-ranging change in productivity, growth patterns that are determined by market variation, urbanisation and change in climate condition. However, there was a steady demand was existed for cash crops, and 1990's New Economic Policy brought trade liberalisation for export oriented agriculture commodities. This raised the demand for cash crops and major land had come under plantation crops in the region.

Table-1
Main crops and there production

Crops	Production area (acres)	Production (quintal)	Production (Q) For every acre
Arecanut	170.55	1020.38	5.98
Coconut	120.82	1179.03	9.76
Paddy	18.9	150.30	7.95
Cashew nut	58.08	44.07	0.76
Black pepper	Mixed cropping	37.50	-
Banana	Mixed cropping	430.80	-
Vanilla	Mixed cropping	2.4	-
Coco	Mixed cropping	38	-

Source: Field data, 2008

The agriculture plantation is one of the important features, in this region as majority of the farmers in the region have plantation crops in their land, like arecanut, coconut; cashew, banana, cocoa, rubber, black pepper and more recent addition is the Vanilla farming. In plantations, people grow perennial crops, which are of commercial use.

As per the estimation, 600 arecanut trees, 70 coconuts and 70 cashew trees grow on one acre of land in the village. The above table gives an overview on the existing crops, as majority of the land is under the arecanut cultivation and the region produces an estimated 1020 quintals. For every acre of land region has good production of coconut cultivation (9.79). The village has less than 19 acres of land under paddy cultivation and with that, farmers are able to produce only 150 quintals of paddy per annum, that is less than seven quintals per acre and that is not sufficient for the farmers to sustain their food consumption in the region. Significantly, the majority of the small, marginal farmers and landless labourers depend on the public distribution system (PDS) for their basic consumption of rice in the region. Mixed cropping is one of the best techniques to control diseases and retain the soil fertility in the plantation lands. The black pepper, banana, vanilla, cocoa are the mixed crops that are grown in the plantation. Black pepper and cocoa provide financial returns to the farmers in the plantation farming.

There is an increasing shortage of agriculture labour every year. During my fieldwork, farmers reported—that skilled agriculture labour was not easily available. I was aware of the labourer crisis in the Dakshina Kannada but was shocked when I saw the gravity of the problem. It is observed that small farmers usually engaged their entire family in the agriculture and big landholders employ wage labourers to carry out farming in the field. Increased literacy and migration has reduced the supply of agriculture labour. Recently, the Mangalore-Bangalore train service resumed after nearly 20 years of protest, struggle, demand from the local people in the district. Because of this, agriculture labour class is now moving towards Bangalore in search of jobs in the construction industries. This is a weekly migration, wherein they migrate to Bangalore on Sunday night by rain and reach Monday morning. In Bangalore, they work until Friday evening in the construction sites, then in the night return to their native village and enjoy the weekend with their families. There is a huge employment opportunity in construction industry, which pays them more, and there is always attraction of the city life.

Conclusion

The idealistic visions of Indian village has provoked questions about the Dakshina Kannada economy which critically engages with the diverse socio-cultural factors commercial oriented crop productions that have horizontal and vertical relationships in the social, cultural, economic and political

conditions of the district. Land that was a fundamental factor for the production and economic growth of the farmers is losing its value as majority of the youth are showing disinterest in the practice of farming. Many youngsters are migrating to town and city in search of education and better job opportunities. From post land reform phase (1970-80 onwards), the district is experiencing different types of migrations that could be identified as temporary, permanent, inter-village, inter- district, state, and international migrations. The situation is similar in, Bettadka villages where rural educated youths are migrating urban centres. A majority of them who have migrated are the Brahmins, Bunts and Muslims to Bangalore, Mumbai and the Gulf countries (Middle Eastern), respectively. The historical migration patterns of the caste has influenced the present day migration, interestingly majority of the Brahmins from the village are working as doctors, engineers in Mangalore, Bangalore and developed countries. Bunts community had maximum paddy land areas, but after land reform, they have migrated to Mumbai in search of jobs as many lost major portion of their land for tenants. From 1970s, onwards Muslims started migrating to Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, U.A.E., Kuwait, Qatar as small skill labourers to work in their oil reserves.

The joint family was an important social organization, which contributed largely towards productive institutions has slowly disappeared. Fragmentation of the joint family into nuclear families resulted in fragmentation of the landholdings between family members. Size of the agriculture landholding among the individuals is decreasing because of fragmentation of joint families. The fragmentation of landholding is less economical for paddy cultivation in the rural society. Reduced size of the landholding created less employment opportunities and many farmers are shifting to alternative livelihood occupations. Women are moving away from agriculture and are engaging in small-scale industries, factories, beedi rolling or as agriculture wage labourers in the region. All these transformation in agriculture forced the farmers to either to sell their land or to apply high levels of fertilizers to get more production from small agriculture plots. Higher production or yield from the small land holding is the main object of the farmers leading to depletion of the agriculture land. Shortage of agriculture farm labour supply has also led to the problem in cultivating the agriculture land and therefore looking for other alternative use of land. The conversion of coconut plantation into rubber plantation in the commercialising the Agriculture sector is clearly visible and more than a thousand hectares of land converted to rubber plantation approximately in 20-25 km radius. The transition I was able to see only after spending 6-8 months in my field area and is more visible in the border and the villages of Kerala. Change is inevitable, but what is happening in Dakshina Kannada agriculture prominence further, as there exist high risk for farmers to lose their source of livelihood to the market economy.

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