

The Bigger Picture

Let us look at the bigger picture today; how has the ownership and management of land in the villages across the country evolved over the last two millennia or so ? That could give us some clues for deciphering the background for the emergence of the gāṃvkārīs. Baden-Powell writes of the two forms of villages : the *raiyaṭwāri* village and the joint village; this he applies to villages across the country towards the turn of the 19th century. Baden-Powell traces the former type of village tenure mainly (though not exclusively) to the south of the Vindhya and the latter to the north of it. [Baden-Powell, 1896 : *The Indian Village Community*, 8]

According to Baden-Powell, a ‘tribal stage of society’ is more or less an essential characteristic of the evolution of *raiyaṭwāri* villages. So is a clan wise division of the territory, containing a number of villages, each under its own headman or chief, who is a natural and essential part of the *raiyaṭwāri* institution. The control over land, in some sense, would rest with the headman; every member of the clan was entitled to receive an allotment of land sufficient for his wants. But the very concept of ownership as understood in modern times seems to have been absent in this system. The area available for tillage being very large in comparison with the existing tribal numbers, families could settle where they pleased within the general area recognized as belonging to their clan. Nevertheless, as the headman or chief of each village was always an important personage, it was doubtless that the site for clearing and settlement was selected under his guidance; ownership as such was perhaps redundant. The position of the headman was invariably hereditary. When the kings extended their suzerainty over the territory, the office of the headman was officially recognized and utilized for maintenance of law and order and collection of revenue. [Baden-Powell, 1896 : 9]

As against this, according to Baden-Powell, a ‘joint village’ was formed when ‘*either a ruling, conquering, and often a non-agriculturist community, has taken the superior or landlord position over an earlier existing village group of cultivators, usually of aboriginal or some mixed or humbler descent; or else they have founded their own village in the virgin waste, either by their own exertions, if agriculturists by nature, or by aid of tenants and dependents.*’ [Baden-Powell, 1896 : 20] In practice, the ‘joint village’ system actually refers to a ‘zamindari’ or ‘patidari’ system where the village lands constitute the property of a joint family. In a joint village, there are two classes of persons, one with proprietary rights, the other without them. [Srinivas, 1951 : *The Social Structure of a Mysore Village*, in *The Economic Weekly*, October 30, 1951, 1051] This model is far from the gāṃvkārī system. Some scholars tend to equate the two on the assumption that the gāṃvkārī constitutes a body of proprietary joint families. Though in some villages the

gāṁvkārīs could have over time degenerated into a ‘bodies of proprietary joint families’, this would be an exception rather than the rule.

The gāṁvkārī does not seem to fit into either of the two pan-India models; we therefore need to look for specific circumstances. In the absence of any early epigraphic or other records, oral traditions being the only sources of information, we have to interpret the latter in the context of the evolution of the physical landscape of Koṁkaṇ. For this purpose we divide Koṁkaṇ into three parts : the trans-Sahyādrī Koṁkaṇ, the coastal Koṁkaṇ prior to the receding of the sea and the coastal Koṁkaṇ post the receding of the sea. The village tenure systems in the trans-Sahyādrī Koṁkaṇ could more or less conform to those found in the Deccan in general. The village tenure systems in the coastal Koṁkaṇ prior to the receding of the sea could have been similar, given the fact that the settlements on the either side of the Sahyādrī seem to have been part of a habitational continuum. However we need to be careful in coming to such a conclusion, as the agro-climatic conditions seem to have been similar only up to a certain point, not in the plateau to the east of it.

Could we see the difference between Baden-Powell’s two types of village tenures - the *raiṇyatwāri* village and the joint village - as the difference between farming in the alluvial plains and farming in the more difficult terrain ? In this context, we need to note the circumstance highlighted by Filipe Nery Xavier; he points out that wherever or whenever the sovereign or his agents are extortive in their collection of tax or tribute, the very idea of property tends to get extinguished. [Xavier, 1907 : *Bosquejo Historico das Comunidades das Aldeas dos Concelhos das Ilhas, Salcete e Bardez*, Vol. 1, 75] Deccan has chronically suffered from low crop productivity and frequent droughts. Its plight has been described in several narrations, and archaeobotanical studies. In such circumstances any stable village tenure system in that territory would have been under threat. In fact Arcamone categorically speaks of “*the farmers of the hinterland, hard pressed by debts or taxes, renounced the land and the king, fled with household utensils and cattle, and came to this peninsula so that they may be able to cultivate it for their livelihood.*” (Fernandes, 1981: *Uma Descrição e Relação de ‘De Sasatana Peninsula in IndiaeStatu’ Textus Inediti*, 94)

This seems to have happened after the sea receded. Beginning 2,000 BCE, the sea is supposed to have receded little by little, exposing the submerged land. [Hashimi, 1995 : *Holocene Sea Level Fluctuations On Western Indian Continental Margin*, in *Journal Of The Geological Society Of India*, 46] And around 1000 BCE people are supposed to have begun leaving the villages in the affected region. (Clutton-Brock, 2012 : *Animals As Domesticates*, 89) It is possible that it is these people who settled the villages in the newly exposed land. And formed the gāṁvkārīs. Could it be that they already had a similar system in the region they had fled from, which was destroyed by the droughts and the extortive policies of their rulers, and which they tried to recreate in their new homeland ? Who could these people be ? In all likelihood they were Deccan caḍḍī. Could

that be the reason why out of the 131 gāṁvkārīs in Salcete, Bardez and Tiswadi, 45 were exclusively of Deccan caḍḍī ?