



‘Agraharas of Ancient Karnataka’

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Abstract

Agraharas were group of settlements of brahmins who formed a corporate body and administered all affairs of the agraharas, including education. They became the foremost educational institutions in southern India during the medieval period. The earliest agrahara in medieval Karnataka appears to be that of Talagunda or Sthanakundur (in present day Shimoga district). The most important of these establishments was of consisting of a community of learned Brahmanas, whose profound scholarship attracted students from distant places. Here education of an advanced type was disseminated to all and sundry, in all branches of human knowledge. It was here that people of diverse races and religious assembled. The agraharas may therefore be said to have constituted the real universities of medieval India the stadium generally or schools of universal learning. Present study has made an attempt to study the various aspect of agraharas in academic advancement in Karnataka, based on both primary and secondary sources

Key words: Agraharas, Talagunda, Kadambas, Mayuravarma, Brahmanas

Introduction

Ancient Karnataka had a network of Educational Institutions in the form of *agrasaharas*. An *agrahara* is a settlement of scholarly Brahmanas endowed with lands, houses and other facilities with a view to help them engage themselves fully in academic pursuits which were a part of the *Shatkarmas* (six-fold duties of performance of sacrifices or *yagnas*, officiating as priests at sacrificial activity, engaging oneself in studies, teaching, making gift and receiving gifts were factors enjoyed by the brahmana. These *agrasaharas* were founded by kings' queens, generals and other such rich persons.

Settings of Agrahara

The agrahara as a general rule was situated in the country at some distance from the cities, and formed a unit by itself. The principle which was closely adhered to, while founding these educational institutes, was the selection of a site and setting which was suitable for academic

ease. The choice always felt in favor of the villages. For here alone could have the pure and cheerful atmosphere, the open and delightful spaces and the smiling meadows, the shady groves and the green fields waving with spontaneous vegetation. However, in course of time the agrahara on account of its own importance and intercourse with the outside world grew into a flourishing city. Thus, the grant of Belligame was a town which, in all likelihood, grew after the establishment of the university. Yet the necessity of having a pleasant spot for the site of university was always recognized. This is evident from the description given in the records of the Belligame agrahara which said among the myriads of countries”, so runs the inscription “ the famous Kuntala country is the best, in it the Banavase-nad is the best, in which, if well considered, Belligame the treasury of good people the mother of cities (*Pttanagala Tavarmmane*) is the best, its fame being spread throughout the whole world bounded by the ocean. Being the sole abode of the learned (otherwise, the gods) it is like the splendid Bhogavati-pura and in wealth may be compare with Alakapura-thus celebrated through the sea-engirdled earth,

Endowment of Agraharas

While advancement of learning in their kingdom was no doubt the ruling motive, the kings were no less persuaded by the prevalent belief that the establishment of an agrahara promoted the well-being of the founder in the life hereafter. Thus, an inscription of Soyi-deva mentions that being inclined to dharma or the acquisition of merit ruler gave directions” to his minister to do all that was needed to convert the village into a Brahman settlement. The record of Soma-bhupa avers that by establishing an agrahara he described to make his own birth bear fruit. The land thus endowed was partly divided among the principal Brahmana families, while the rest was set apart as endowment for the teaching of the different branches of study and portion of this land was also made over to the temple of the agrahara for meeting the expenses of religious service.

Teachers

The agraharas imparted primary education, which was in the Kannada language. In one instance, the puranabhatta (teacher of the epics) read out the puranas in the evening and the rest of the day was utilized to teach children. The teacher was known as the *akkariga* or *Karnatapandita*. These teachers, who taught the reading and writing of the Kannada alphabet were village schoolmasters. However, there were also other teachers who taught Nagara (Sanskrit), Tigula (Tamil) and Arya (Marathi) as per an inscription of 1290 C.E. It was required of boys to learn different languages, which enabled them to travel from one region to another, for reasons of trade, pilgrimage and learning. An agrahara was typically composed of different vocations such as blacksmiths (*kammara*), carpenters (*badiga*), goldsmiths (*suvarnakara*), security men (*talara*), flower-men and farmers. Youngsters of all the families in the community

received elementary education locally in their families and later through guilds. Most of the agraharas had groups of villages under them and were closely connected with other educational institutions such as shales, mathas.

Agraharas initiated by Kadamba rulers

The earliest agrahara in medieval Karnataka appears to be that of Talagunda or Sthanakundur (in present day Shimoga district). An inscription mentions that the ancestor of Mayurasharman (or Varman), the founder of the Kadamba dynasty, brought thirty-two learned Brahmins from Ahichchatra and settled them in Sthanakundur, turning it into an agrahara (350 CE.). Mayurasharman granted 144 villages to the support of the agrahara. Further details of this agrahara are available in an inscription from 1150 C.E. indicating that Talagunda continued as a famous centre of education for eight centuries. There were forty-eight students and eight teachers of different subjects, such as the vedas, vedanta, prosody, rupavatara (grammar) and prabhakara (philosophy). An inscription of 1091 AD, says that the Brahmins there were learned in the Vedas, Vedangas and minor angas, in Mimamsa, in the six systems of Logic in Smritis in Puranas and in Drama. To help the professors to carry on their noble work, the Kadamba king Tailapa induced his overlord the Chalukyan Emperor Someshavara on the latter's visit to Belligame to make a grant to the famous agrahara of that city. The agrahara of Kuppatur received substantial assistance from the Kadamba Kirtivarma and his queen Degamve in the Belgaum district is typical of the way in which an agrahara was established. The initiative to found this institution was taken by Kamaladevi, queen of the Kadamba king Sivachita. The Brahmins to whom she wanted to donate this agrahara were acquainted with all the Vedas, Vedanga, Nyaya, Mimamsa, Sankya, Yoga, Vedanta, Smriti, Ithasa, Purana and Astronomy and delighted in the six duties of performing yajna for oneself and others, study and instruction, giving and receiving gifts. They were natives of many countries. While her husband was presiding over his court, she made known her desire to him thus. I wish to make a grant to brahmins of the village of Degame.

Agraharas during Badami Chalukyas

Badami was to the early Chalukyas times., its description in the inscription of 699 AD calls Vatapi, or Badami, an adhisthana and says that it was adorned by several thousands of excellent dvijas or twice-born, persons endowed with knowledge of the fourteen sciences or vidyas. And an inscription of about 759 AD supports the above statement by saying that it had 2000 members learned in the four vedas. The term, *adhisthana* used in the earlier inscription may be taken to indicate that it was a religious center and center of Vedic learning. In addition to Badami, Aihole was another center of learning in early Chalukya and later times. An inscription of the 8th and 9th century AD, says that one Bennama Somayaji gave a grant to the five hundred, who constituted the grant body of Chaturvedis of the excellent capital Aryapura

(Aihole). This may mean Ayyavole or Aihole, was an agrahara containing 500 Mahajans, and it continued to hold that distinction later also, for an inscription of 1119 AD refers to it as an agrahara with 500 Swami's or rulers.

Agraharas of Rastrakuta period

The most famous agrahara of Rastrakutas times was Salotgi, in the Bijapur District. In about 945 AD Narayana, the chief minister of Krishnaraja III got a school built which was handsome and magnificent in its splendor. There were scholars from many lands. They were well provided with land for their maintenance. The chief of that village, one Chakrayudha Buddha and the two hundred Mahajans, or shareholders, of the agrahara, gave to the community of the scholars some first-time land measuring 500 *niyaratanas* of land as a flower-garden and 12 *nivartnas* of land for lights. All these gifts were exempt from taxes. At the time of marriage, thread-ceremony and tonsure in the village, presents were to be given to the scholars. They were to be invited for feasts given by the assembly of the agrahara. The teacher in the school was given 50 *nivartanas* of land exempt from taxes.

Agraharas during the later Chalukyan period

Ummachige near Gadag, was an agrahara which was established in the beginning of the later Chalukya times. There was a college there with a free hostel attached to it. The Bhatta or professor, giving an advanced course was given a share of 50 *mattars* of land and one house-site. He could expound Nyasa and Prabhakara. His students received 25 *mattars* of land for their maintenance. The general course was given by a teacher called 'Akkariga', or a man of letters. He could teach and compose works on mathematics, astronomy, prosody, poetics etc., and was well versed in grammar. He was given 25 *mattars* of land and with this allowance he was expected to teach his pupils, feeding them once a day and supplying them with cloth every year. Later, the Chalukyan king Vikramaditya VI invited learned Brahmins from Tamil Nadu, and turned Nirgunda in Koguli province into an agrahara (agraharikritya) and donated it to the brahmins.

Administration of Agraharas

Agrahara consisted of a corporate Brahman community which administered the affairs connected with its management. The actual work of the administration however devolved on the assembly of the *Mahajans* or the leaders of the community, whose number varied from two hundred to four hundred or more, according to the size of the agrahara. In the same way the endowment of properties that was made from time to time by the sovereigns came directly under the control of the agrahara authorities and soldiers and tax-collectors were expressly forbidden to encroach on them or to exercise any jurisdiction.

The assembly being an executive body had to perform other civic functions as well. These probably included the

- Maintenance of charitable institutions celebration of the religious festivals,
- Entertainment of strangers who visited the agraharas, staging of plays, reading of the Puranas and the Vedas
- The assemblies arranging of disputations and lectures and other work of this description.
- They also carried out the municipal duties such as housing, sanitation and repair and construction of roads.

Following the general trend of all Indian institutions, one may surmise that the organization and distribution of charities was the most important duties. an inscription at Tumbarahosur that the sheriff of the agrahara of Bhattara-Posavar purchased land in Hosavur and granted it for a rest-house for strangers. It is very likely that he gave this land in private charity: at any rate it gives us a clue to the understanding of the duties of these Mahajans. It may be gathered from other inscriptions that the money granted by the charity of kings and nobles to the agraharas was invested with these leaders of the community and from the accruing interest they were to finance the various schemes scheduled in the endowment. Thus, the Ittagi inscription of the time of the Chalukya Vikramaditya records that the General Ahadevayya delivered the property into hands of sheriff of the great agrahara Ittagi and the rest of the four hundred mahajanas specifying the various purposes for which the grant was made.

Subjects of learning

An idea of the life in agraharas can be gathered from the various records that describe them as they were in the period of their glory. According to one of these inscriptions the mahajanas of the Kappatur agraharas were perfect imparting in *Yama, niyama shyanna dharana japa mauna svadhyaya* and *Samadhi*. They were proficient in the Rig-Veda, Sama Veda and Atharvaveda, the Vedangas, the 18 puranas and Smrities in music in dialectics, in Vatsyanana's sutras and in knowledge of language: they were versed in natakas and rhetoric and took pleasure in offering food, medicines, asylum and knowledge of sciences they were diligent in discharging the sixfold duties of the Brahmanas; they were like an adamant fortress in giving shelter to those that sought their protection.

Other epigraphs aver that the Brahmanas in the agraharas observed the major and minor disciplines and meditation, practiced spiritual concentration, studied the scriptures and performed ablutions. Another inscription tells us that the Brahmanas were expected to be men of principles immovable as a rock, hospitable kind to their dependents and far from coveting other men's wives. The same record gives us an interesting piece of information, when it

observes that the mahajanas of Lakkundi were leaders in battle. This would imply that they were men who had trained themselves in war like exercises, which is after all not very surprising in view of the fact that there are many instances in the records shewing that the Brahmanas of those days made no scruple to handle the sword. A viragal of 1141 AD informs us that in a fight that took place between the agrahara of Kuppatur and the neighboring village of Nerilige on a dispute regarding the boundary of these villages several men lost their lives. In the following year another fight occurred between the same two villages with similar results. A third viragal tells that a battle was fought in 1218 AD between the armies of the Mahamandalesvara Bappa-deva and the one of Bamarasa on the Kappatur plain and that Kesiga, the retainer of the Kuppatur agrahara, who somehow got himself involved, lost his life. The last but not the least important feature that has still to be described is the student community and the teachers. It is clear from the Ballgame records that these scholars came from far off places and consequently were of different races and creeds. It must also be noted that the agraharas sometimes contained mathas of Jaina and Buddhists. It is pleasant to relate that in spite of the religious differences that divided the inhabitants of the agraharas there existed perfect amity and good will among them.

Scholarship

The students it may be inferred from the records, largely depended on the clarity of the rich and benevolent people who generously endowed these seats of learning. However, we are not able to decide whether this applied to the whole student community or only to a section of them. Perhaps it is more reasonable to say that the scholarship was intended for supporting the poor and deserving students. enabled them to acquire knowledge but also to maintain themselves, since they were generously supplied with food and clothing free of charge

Conclusion

The main object underlying these institutions was the advancement of learning in the country. Epigraphical evidence as regards the discourses that were held there on dharma and other subjects. This must have acted as a pleasant diversion from the monotony of the ordinary teaching routine. the professors devoted themselves whole heartedly to the pursuit of knowledge and the training of their wards. It will not be incorrect to say that the existence of these three different communities promoted a healthy spirit of academic discussions in which religious disputations were given a prominent place. Education in agraharas was mostly a community effort, this made for continuity of education tradition it was indeed the basis of intellectual and moral culture of land, and also material advancement.

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