Karhad Brahmins: Historical background

By Radhakrishna Belluru
Translation by K R Bhat

The name Karhada is derived from the word Karhataka. The word has regional rather than communal connotation. The South-Western part of modern Maharashtra was once well known by that name. A copper plaque commissioned by Chalukya king Vikramaditya in the year 703 A D contains the words कहाड विनिग्रंत माहात्म्यां अनविभेष्यायाम्. Well known Kannada poet Janna (12th century) refers to Karhata in his champu classic Yashodhara Charite. Another work कराहातक माहात्म्यम् written in 1860 says that Karahataka country lay at the confluence of Krishna-Veni and Koyna rivers. Several other inscriptions and documents since the 10th century also refer to Karhataka or Karahataka. All these references point at one thing: that a country by the name करहट्टक was a famous land. Nagavarma, a Kannada grammarian, in his celebrated work 'Bhasha Bhushana' mentions the words 'Karahadadol puttidatam Karahadicham'). From this reference, one can conclude that what was hitherto a locational nomenclature had already acquired a communal (pertaining to the community) connotation.

Vasudev Athale is of the opinion that all Karhades follow अश्वतात्त्व सूत्र Moving out of Karahataka, when they settled down in the Konkan, they continued to be referred to as Karhatakas which name stuck to them. Interestingly, most of the Brahmins found in the original Karahataka country today are Deshasthas!

The word Karahataka eventually got corrupted into Karhata > Karhada > Karhada > Karada
Also Karahataka > Karhata.

Today, a town between Kolhapur and Satara is known as Karad. It lies about 70 kilo meters from the borders of Karnataka. There is no doubt that this was the Karhataka of the olden days. A group of the Karhatakas eventually migrated to the Konkan and onwards to certain places in Kasaragod and South Kanara districts. Late खंडेरि अन्तर्देशित्र in his अमम्पडि माहात्म्यम् records thus:

ते धारवादेषु च पुन्तापने नृत्तिकायायमयि केरलादिषु
वितलितिष्यरे प्रीतमयि हि भूदु: स्वेतीविताय निनिहतिधिषामुः

Today, outside Maharashtra, Karhade Brahmins are found in large concentration in Dharwar, Goa, South Kanara and Kasaragod district areas. There is no uniformity in the language (dialect) spoken by them, in their traditions or life
styles. That forces one to conclude that they had either come in different groups or from different regions.

Of all these groups, the one that had chosen to settle down in Kasaragod area, had its language coming under the greatest influence of Dravidian languages. Almost 50% of the words are borrowed from either Kannada or Tulu (a local dialect). Those settled in Dhanwar and South Kanara have got their languages almost in tact. From this, one is again tempted to conclude that the group found in Kasaragod is the oldest to move out of the Konkan.

There is also a community of Marathi speaking Naiks found in this area. Most probably, they kept company to the Karhad Brahmins as they moved from place to place. Their language too had come under the influence of Dravidian languages, especially Tulu. Till recently, they were found living close to Karhad Brahmin settlements. Traditionally, they seek out Karhad Brahmins for priesthood when they want to perform any of their rites.

There is no incontrovertible evidence found yet to pin point when the Karhad Brahmins came to settle down in Kasaragod area. Prof P K Gode of Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, Pune opines that they have a history dating back to 930 A D. According to him, Mitakshara (मितक्षर) who was the court poet of Vikramaditya VI of Chalukya dynasty (1076 – 1126) has referred to a community of Brahmins who practiced ‘Shakala Shakha (शाकल शाखा) and Ashwalayana Sutra’ (अश्वलायन सूत्र). Shilaharas were the vassals of Chalukyas. The latter are believed to have brought some ‘Ashwalayana Sutra and Shakala Shakhya’ Brahmins with them as priests. Since they came from Karhataka, the people of Konkan called them as Karhade when they went there to settle down, according to historians.

A community of Ramakshatriyas (रामक्षत्रिय) is also found in Kasaragod area. This group too is believed to have come in from Vijayadurga area of Ratnagiri in the 16th century and settled down here. Vijayadurga was used as a military base by Vijayanagara (विजयनगर) as well as Keladi (केळडी) rulers. A group of Ramakshatriyas shifted their loyalty to Shringeri Mutt from Kaule (कौले) Mutt during the reign of Veerabhadra Nayak of Keladi (केळडी) (1630 – 1646), according to a document (sanad) available at Shringeri. A dispute between the Konkanis and Ramakshatriyas is believed to have prompted the latter to go for the change, historians believe. Veerabhadra Nayak was succeeded by Shivappa Nayak.

Marching with a battalion on Ramakshatriya warriors, Shivappa Nayak annexed some forts in Kasaragod area and established his overlordship there. When Shivappa Nayak returned to his capital, he set up the Ramakshatriyas, locally known as Kote's, to hold the reigns for him. The Ramakshatriyas are known for their athletic build and valour. Mushtika Chanuras, locally known as Mattigas, are a faction of Ramakshatriyas, and are equally famous for their valour.
Madras Gazetteer of 1894 says, “Karadi Brahmins are their (Ramakshatriyas’) priests and owe allegiance to the head of the Shringeri Mutt.” Till recently, the Kote’s used to seek out Karades to perform their religious rites. Both Karhades and Ramakshatriyas have their roots in Ratnagiri and became followers of Shringeri Mutt after they settled down in Kasaragod. Both are Shaakta’s or worshippers of Shakti.

It may not be out of place to add a few surmises here in respect the Durga Parameshwari temple at Malla, near Kasaragod. The word **Malla** (मल्ल) means big or large in Tulu. In Kannada and Malayalam, it means a wrestler. Not far from the temple of Malla, at Polali, the Keladi rulers had a fort. In the past, the tradition has it that several Mushika Chanura families used to live there. They were also associated with the management of the Malla temple. From this, one is tempted to conclude that Malla temple must have got its name because of its association with the Mallas or wrestlers.

From the evidence so far culled out, one can say that the Karhades and Ramakshatriyas came to settle in Kasaragod area during the reign of Keladi rulers in the 17th century.

References:

1. कारहड ब्राह्मणांचा इतिहास

2. Janna, who wrote Yashodhara Charite in 1209, was a Jain. The Shilaharas (शिलाहर) who were ruling Karadhake at that time, were friendly towards Jains, opines R G Bhandarkar in *Early History of the Deccan*, p. 124.

3. मध्यप्रदेश राजाओं सन्मान श्री करधाकरमें विद श्री विनाई गुप्ता. कुछ हितार्थ संग्रह: II

5. About 600 years ago, Rani Kamaladevi and her minister Madhava Mantri were instrumental in bringing a group of Karhades into Goa. They were later appointed as priests who eventually came to be called Padhye Brahmins in Goa. – K. Srinivasa Bhat in Karhada.

The word is generally written as Karhada. I have however used the simplified form ‘Karada’ in my M.Phil. thesis.

*Belluru Radhakrishna.*

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