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HAIDAR ALI'S INVASION OF COORG A STUDY IN MILITARY HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

The invasion and conquest of the kingdom of Coorg by Haidar Ali started the process of the eventual annexation of Coorg by Mysore and later by the British East India Company. But this remains an obscure chapter in the history of South India. Due to the disagreement in the primary and secondary sources concerned with these events, this study aims to thoroughly whet the available sources and provide a plausible reconstruction of the happenings as they occurred. It is seen that the pattern established with the initial invasion i.e. conquest followed by rebellion in turn followed by punitive measures became set from the initial invasion of Haidar till the end of the Mysore Sultanate.

KEYWORDS :Haidar Ali, Mysore, Coorg, Madikeri, Rajendraname, Dutch records, Wilks

INTRODUCTION

Haidar Ali's invasion and conquest of the kingdom of Coorg is a little-studied chapter in the history of South India. Though Haidar was a towering figure in the history of India of the eighteenth century, his life and deeds have attracted relatively less attention from scholars. This is in sharp contrast to his son Tipu Sultan who holds eternal fascination for the historical researchers. His campaigns against the Haleri kingdom and the fate of the prisoners from Coorg have been the subject of many studies and articles in scholarly research. But Haidar Ali remains an obscure figure. Apart from studies of colonial historians such as Mark Wilks, Maistre De La Tour, and Francis Robson, the only studies of note by Indian historians are the works of C. Hayavadana Rao, Narendra Krishna Sinha and B. Sheikh Ali

who have written extensively on his wars with the Marathas and the British. But Haidar's campaigns against other regional kingdoms such as Bidanur or Coorg have not been studied in detail. This is not only due to the paucity of sources but also due to conflicting accounts present in the historical chronicles that do exist.

Haidar's invasion and conquest of Coorg which was ruled by the Haleri dynasty marked the start of a chain of events that culminated in the annexation of that kingdom first by the Mysore sultanate and finally by the British East India Company and the end of the Haleri line of kings, resulting in the extinction of the last independent ruling kingdom in South India. But there are conflicting accounts of this important event in the works of the colonial historians and there has hardly been any study of it by scholars in India after independence. Therefore, this research paper intends to peruse and match the accounts of Indian and foreign scholars and historians in order to provide a plausible and more complete account of the period and the events that occurred; and it will probe into the strengths and weaknesses of each account. By minutely examining these works, information about the relations between Coorg and the ruler of Mysore can be gleaned and a plausible narrative about the events that occurred can be reconstructed.

PRELUDE TO THE WAR

The year in which the invasion occurred is the subject of controversy. An account from the kingdom of Coorg's point of view is given in the *Rajendraname* or Chronicle of Rajendra which was written in the early 1800s under the auspices of the ruling king Dodda Virajendra Wodeya. It gives the genealogy of the kings of Coorg from 1633 to 1807 but is mainly intended to glorify Virarajendra. It was translated into English in the 1830s after the British conquest and was extensively studied by officials like Benjamin Lewis Rice and the Reverend G. Richter in the preparations of their gazetteers about the region. According to this chronicle, the kings of the Haleri dynasty of Coorg were a collateral branch of the Keladi Nayakas. It states that when Haidar Ali conquered Bidanur (now Nagar) in 1763, he laid claim to Coorg by right of being the ruler of the kingdom of Canara¹. After wresting the territory of Yelusavira from the king Chikka Virappa, in 1765 he sent an army under Faizullah Khan to attack the kingdom. The chronicle says that Haidar's forces were defeated after several battles and so he offered to make peace and restore the district of Uchingi to Coorg in return for a tribute of 300,000 pagodas which was agreed to by Chikka Virappa. But he failed to deliver on his promise and so war broke out again. Lingaraja, the commander of the Coorg armies, defeated Faizullah and captured his guns and treasure. Haidar Ali was forced to make peace and give the districts of Panje and Bellare to Coorg which happened in 1768². After this event, Haidar did not make any fresh attempts at conquest in Coorg for the next few years.

The above account is suspect for a number of reasons. Benjamin Lewis Rice and G. Richter, both of whom were stationed in Coorg, implicitly believed in the *Rajendraname* and used it in their accounts of Coorg. Lewis Rice, in particular is convinced about the veracity of the chronicle and is impressed with its literary style³. Richter, however, admits that there are shortcomings in the *Rajendraname* as it was primarily intended to glorify the kings of the Haleri dynasty⁴. However, the earliest historian of Mysore, Mark Wilks, whose works provide a near-contemporary account does not make any mention of skirmishes between Coorg and the forces of Haidar Ali during the entire decade of the 1760s. According to his *Historical Sketches of South India*, after the conquest of Bidanur, Haidar was involved with the Marathas and then was preoccupied with the consolidation of his kingdom in Mysore. He gives the year of the first invasion of Coorg by the forces of Haidar Ali as 1773⁵. This is corroborated by two other contemporary sources. Firstly, the memoirs of Ram Chandra Rao Punganuri, an official in the service of

Haidar and Tipu, do not make any mention of an attack on Coorg during the 1760s. According to him, the invasion started in 1773⁶.

Secondly, the Dutch East India Company stationed at Cochin kept a watch on Haidar's movements from 1762 as they were apprehensive of his designs on the Malabar. Their correspondence describes several of his campaigns in the 1760s such as those against Bidanur and Calicut but there is no mention of Coorg in that decade. It is written in Dutch East India Company letters that Haidar invaded Coorg in April 1773 with an army of 20,000. These more or less corroborate the account given by Wilks. Also, there is no mention of any alliance with Haidar Ali by a prince of Coorg in either of the sources. Lewis Rice also accepts Wilks' version of events in his revised edition of the *Mysore Gazetteer published in 1900*⁸. Therefore it is certain that, contrary to the *Rajendraname*, Haidar's first invasion of Coorg occurred in April 1773 and not in 1765. One plausible reason for this discrepancy is that the kings of Coorg wanted to acquire a heroic genealogy of resistance to Mysore.

HAIDAR ALI'S INVASION OF COORG

According to the *Rajendraname*, after the death of the dual-ruling kings in 1770, a succession dispute arose in Coorg. The commander Lingaraja wanted to place his nephew on the throne. But he was thwarted in his designs and therefore fled with his adherents to Mysore where he offered to ally with Haidar Ali in an invasion of Coorg. Accordingly, when free to pursue this aim, Haidar led an expedition into Coorg in 1773 in conjunction with Lingaraja who apprised him of all the secret and convenient routes into the region. Having overcome all the obstacles on the way, he laid siege to Madikeri, the capital of Coorg, and then captured and killed the king Devapparaja after first imprisoning him and his family at Srirangapatna. He then gave the kingdom to Lingaraja on the annual payment of a tribute of 24,000 pagodas and retained the districts of Sulya, Bellare, Panje and Yelusavira. After the death of Lingaraja in 1780, Haidar renewed his aggressions against Coorg and succeeded in conquering the entire country. He then stationed a garrison of his troops in Madikeri and appointed his own officials to govern the region. But the inhabitants rose in rebellion and ousted his troops from Coorg. Haidar had died in the interregnum and the region was reconquered by his son Tipu Sultan¹⁰.

The above version of events is at considerable variance with respect to other, more contemporary sources. In the accounts of Wilks, Hayavadana Rao, the memoirs of Ram Chandra Rao and the Dutch records of Cochin, there is no mention of any application for aid by any member of the ruling dynasty of Coorg to Haidar. According to both Wilks and Moens, the Dutch governor of Cochin, Haidar was contemplating another conquest in the Malabar region which had slipped out of his grasp during the First Mysore War. Though earlier he had marched through the Western Ghats to Calicut, this time he decided to use an alternative route across Coorg and Wayanad¹¹. His rationale was that the relatively wide and level country would allow the passage of a large number of troops and supplies relatively quickly. Also, he wanted to complete his conquests of the regional powers. According to Wilks, Haidar invaded Coorg in November 1773, catching the ruling king, Devapparaja (who is given as Devaiya in Wilks, Hayavadana Rao and Punganuri) by surprise¹². But the Dutch records say that the invasion occurred in April 1773 with an army of 20,000 troops¹³. The letters by the Dutch governor of Cochin, Adriaan Moens, are more likely to be accurate on this point as they are near contemporary to the events described. Also, it is unlikely that Haidar Ali would launch an invasion in November during the retreating monsoon season as the swollen streams and rivers would make transportation difficult and there would be the danger of epidemics. Moreover, the invasion of Malabar was in full swing in early 1774 which would have been difficult had Haidar been involved in Coorg. So April 1773 becomes

the most likely date for the invasion of Coorg by Haidar Ali.

The invasion caught Devapparaja unawares. With the kingdom being totally unprepared to meet the attack, it was quickly conquered by Haidar who personally led the invasion. The troops of Coorg assembled on a forested hill to make a last stand under their king and harassed the Mysore forces through surprise attacks¹⁴. Haidar now decided to use stringent methods which had been very effective in suppressing the rebellion of the Nairs during his earlier invasion of the Malabar. He announced that anyone who brought him the head of an enemy would be rewarded with 5 rupees. Around 700 heads were collected in this manner. Haidar apparently was struck by the handsome features of the enemy that had been killed and ordered a stop to the killings, even reproaching an irregular who brought a couple of heads to him. But the purpose had been achieved. The country of Coorg capitulated and Devapparaja fled from the field. He was later captured and sent in captivity to Srirangapatna, an event with echoes in the *Rajendraname*. Haidar then consolidated his position by setting up a fort in Madikeri and confirming the positions of the existing landholders in the region. He introduced a new method of land revenue in the region. Previously, the revenue in Coorg had been fixed as one-tenth of the annual produce. Haidar raised it to one-sixth of the produce which was a moderate increase and was the same as the other Hindu kingdoms in India¹⁶. However, this increased discontent in the region which deepened the antipathy to the invaders that was already present.

No sooner had Haidar returned to Srirangapatna, the people of Coorg rose up in rebellion. They destroyed the outposts set up in the countryside for maintenance of law and order and the collection of revenue and attacked the administrators and soldiers Haidar had stationed there. In this, they were assisted by the ruler of Kottayam who was antagonistic to Haidar¹⁷. Initially, they enjoyed considerable success in wresting control of large areas from the Mysore troops. Finally, they laid siege to the fort at Madikeri, thus threatening to uproot Mysore's hold on the region. Haidar could hardly ignore such a flagrant challenge to his authority as Srirangapatna was only around 48 km from the borders of Coorg. He retaliated with a vengeance. He personally led several columns of his newly raised French-trained infantry to invade Coorg from several axes to the north, south and east in order to root out the rebellion as completely as possible. Using an excellent intelligence network to gather information on the rebels, he led his infantry to destroy the camps of the insurgents and capture their leaders who were all subsequently executed. Haidar also showed his customary ruthlessness in this campaign. It seems that any prisoner who seemed to be above the rank of foot soldier was hanged. He set up a series of outposts in the territory in order to exercise control over it¹⁸. These outposts would maintain communication with each other as well as with other communication centres in Mysore which would enable the swift movement of troops to crush any future rebellion. The conquest and pacification of Coorg occupied the whole of the year 1773. This is perhaps why Wilks confused the date of the invasion as November of that year. It is more likely that during that month the crushing of the rebellion and the pacification process was going on under the personal command of Haidar. Thus, by the beginning of the year 1774 Haidar had successfully annexed Coorg to the kingdom of Mysore.

AFTERMATH

The invasion and annexation of Coorg by Haidar Ali set the pattern for the relations between Mysore and Coorg for the rest of the eighteenth century. There would be rebellions whenever the grip of the Mysore sultan weakened over the region. But these uprisings always drew punitive measures from Haidar and then Tipu who restored the annexation. There were no serious disturbances in Coorg for the rest of the 1770s during the reign of Haidar. However in late 1782, when the tide of the Second

Anglo-Mysore War was turning against him, Coorg and several other territories again rose up in rebellion¹⁹. The rebellion was serious enough for Haidar to detach a major body of troops to check it even though he was already involved in a war with the British. The *Rajendraname* also says that on hearing that Haidar was involved in the Carnatic in 1782, the people of Coorg drove the Muslims out and proclaimed their independence²⁰. Haidar Ali's death in December 1782 prevented immediate reprisals. But in January 1783, his successor Tipu Sultan sent a fresh army to annex Coorg. After the annexation, there would be periodic uprisings with concomitant reprisals. Coorg would not fully regain its independence till the downfall of the Mysore sultanate in 1799. Coorg managed to regain its independence in exchange for a subsidiary alliance with the British East India Company. Under this arrangement, the kingdom of Coorg would remain one of the last independent regional kingdoms in South India till its final conquest by the British in 1834 and the extinction of the Haleri dynasty. Thus this marked the culmination of the historical process that commenced with Haidar's initial invasion of Coorg in 1773.

CONCLUSION

Haidar Ali's invasion and conquest of Coorg and his subsequent relations with this territory form a microcosm of the relations between the Sultanate of Mysore with the other regional kingdoms during the eighteenth century. It was with a combination of speed, skill and ruthlessness that he established his sway over a large part of South India. And the series of rebellions in his realm showed that, though an able general, he was not able to set up a sound administrative apparatus in order to stabilise the conquered areas. This lack of statesmanship would ultimately result in the downfall of the Mysore Sultanate. It is also seen that the historical sources available for this time are at considerable variance to each other. This makes the study of this historical period difficult due to many conflicting accounts and interpretations. Therefore, a careful and thorough perusal of the existing sources is needed to properly reconstruct the events that occurred during this period.

The life and campaigns of Haidar Ali such as the invasion of Coorg have not been studied in detail by historians, particularly in post-independent India. This is ironical as his son Tipu Sultan remains a celebrated figure in Indian historiography. But Haidar is an equally important figure in the history of India; and therefore his life and times need to be studied to a much greater extent by historians. This might happen in the future as new information comes to light and events are studied from different points of view.

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