

Sthanika to Brahmin:
Narratives, Institutions, and Identity in Caste Mobility

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree

of Master of Arts (History)

by

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06 May, 2023

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis entitled “**Sthanika to Brahmin: Narratives, Institutions, and Identity in Caste Mobility**” has been carried out under the guidance of **Neha Chatterji** and has not formed the basis for the award of any other degree, diploma or fellowship previously.

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CERTIFICATE

The research embodied in this thesis entitled “**Sthanika to Brahmin: Narratives, Institutions, and Identity in Caste Mobility**” was conducted by **Shreyas Kolpe** at the Manipal Centre for Humanities under the supervision and guidance of **Neha Chatterji**.

It is hereby certified that the thesis submitted is a bonafide record of research done by the candidate in fulfilment of the requirements for **Master of Arts (History)** degree, and that the thesis has not previously formed the basis for the award to the candidate of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or any other similar title of any other university or society.

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ABSTRACT

The Sthanikas are a caste unique to coastal Karnataka, specifically the districts of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi, which constitute the Tulunadu region. They claim to be Brahmins, but the status was historically denied to them, most notably by the bar on priesthood. While this status is now considered insignificant to squabble over, this was achieved through various means of self-articulation. Caste organizations from the early twentieth century sought to create a distinct Sthanika identity while also laying claim to parity with the other Brahmins of the region. Pamphlets and books start to appear which simultaneously evoke an exalted past and a subsequent history of subordination. The aim of this thesis is to write a social history of the Sthanikas from the nineteenth century to the present, primarily through the lens of caste mobility. Such a study necessarily becomes anthropological as well since the community in the present is the starting point for historical research. It aims to explore the writings and activities of organizations and individuals, while also attempting to incorporate oral narratives. Some aspects of Sthanika discourses of caste are explored including an analysis of their self-image and symbols. This study aims to situate itself in a broader history of caste and modernity in this region. Finally, the study attempts to bring alive the contested grounds of the colonial-modern temple as a site of upper caste formation.

Keywords: Caste mobility, colonial modernity, Sthanikas, Brahmins, Tulunadu.

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Introduction

Tulunadu and the Sthanikas

The districts of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi in coastal Karnataka constitute a distinct social, cultural, and economic zone that is now increasingly referred to by the moniker Tulunadu. This is due to a growing sense of Tuluva ethnic identity in recent decades. The geography of the region has historically determined the borders of the linguistic-cultural matrix. The Western Ghats run parallel to the coast of the Arabian Sea and impose a formidable barrier to incoming monsoon winds. Thus, the coastal strip, falling in the rain shadow, presents a lush contrast to the dry and barren landscape of the Deccan plateau above the Ghats. The terrain seems to have inhibited contact between the Kannada speaking regions of upland Karnataka, and instead seems to have facilitated easier movement of people and ideas along the coast. Tulunadu is spatially situated at the intersection of the Kannada and Malayalam linguistic zones, sharing similarities and differences with both. In addition, languages like Konkani, Beary, and Marathi are spoken in small pockets demarcated by caste, religion, and ethnicity. In fact, within Tulunadu and in its periphery, these very markers constitute a range of identities. In Brahminical accounts, this stretch of India's west coast was reclaimed by the legendary Parashurama from the sea.¹ In this light, Tulunadu is also seen as a land endowed by divinity with numerous places of pilgrimage. The local practices of *bhutaradhane* and *nagaradhane*, spirit worship and serpent worship,

¹ The tradition of Parashurama is current in both Tulunadu and Kerala which are adjacent to each other and share in many aspects of culture and social stratification. The advent of Brahminism in both regions was attributed to the settlement of 32 villages by Brahmins. These traditions appear in texts such as the *Sahyadri Khanda* in Sanskrit, *Gramapaddhati* in Kannada, and *Keralolpatti* in Malayalam. See Nagendra Rao, *Brahmanas of South India* (New Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2005), 12.

respectively, are also understood to have a close relationship with the land. Further, the philosopher Madhvacharya was born around Udipi in the 12th century, founding the *dvaita* school of thought and the *mathas* of Udipi in its wake.² Such a consciousness of religiosity is now evident beyond the borders of Tulunadu, drawing in pilgrims and tourists from southern Karnataka, as well as more distant places. This theme has also attracted serious academic research, with numerous studies on the region's temples, their architecture and iconography, as well as on distinct religious traditions like Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Jainism and the living cults of *bhuta* worship.³

The region is dotted with many temples, with some accorded great reverence due to their hallowed origins or as sites of miraculous power. The temples of Tulunadu have historically been centres of social, political, and economic organization, and today play an important role as cultural centres, especially due to a rising tide of Hindutva sensibility. These temples that house the gods of the pan-India Hindu pantheon are associated with the Brahmins, who have served mainly as priests and continue to do so today. In addition, there are numerous other functions in the everyday conduct of temple ceremonies, that have historically been assigned to different castes. The highly differentiated nature of temple service manifested in activities ranked from high to low, such as assisting the priests, preparing the articles of worship, picking flowers, maintaining the granary, bookkeeping, playing musical instruments, and cleaning, among others. The Sthanikas are one such caste in Tulunadu, that define themselves through their association with temples. Originating in this region, Sthanikas today are spread across Bangalore, Mysore, Mumbai and other towns of Karnataka and Maharashtra, thought to number less than 50,000.⁴

² P Gururaja Bhat, *Studies in Tuluva History and Culture*, second impression (Dr Paduru Gururaja Bhat Memorial Trust: Udipi, 2014 (first impression 1975)), 315.

³ See the Preview in Gururaja Bhat, *Studies in Tuluva History and Culture*, i-xl.

⁴ Devananda Bhat (President, Sthanika Mahamandala) in conversation with the author, April 2023.

The Sthanikas claim to be Brahmins under the appellation Sthanika Brahmin and are today accepted as such. This claim was however denied to them historically. It was marked by a bar on priesthood and confinement to other duties in the temple, including those considered menial. At any rate, this is the image afforded to us at the beginning of the nineteenth century by colonial surveys and which can be substantiated by Sthanika narratives of the past. Nevertheless, the referent points of past discrimination and current relative prosperity allow us to ask some interesting questions about caste mobility. Indeed, the very construction of a caste identity can be interrogated. Much attention has been given to colonial knowledge production and state apparatus such as the census in identifying, classifying, and producing the caste identities that are current today. The record shows that the Sthanikas went through a process of reification that produced a stable Sthanika identity in the twentieth century. The objective of this thesis is to present a social history of the Sthanikas from the nineteenth century to the present. This is aided by a relative abundance of sources authored by Sthanikas themselves and by others such as professional historians. The very existence of such literature is interesting. Why is there, after all, so much writing on a caste that is numerically small and isolated to a small region? On a related note, much of this material is made available on the Internet, at Internet Archive.⁵ At the very least, it shows an enduring interest among Sthanikas and others, in the discourses contained within them and represents an active attempt to disseminate these works even in the present.

The Sthanikas and History

⁵ URLs to these sources have been provided in the Bibliography.

The discipline of history and the Sthanikas have an interesting relationship. From the very outset, history is an integral part of their discourses on caste. It is recognized that the Sthanika is not a timeless category as the Brahmin seems to be. Both writings and narratives foreground change by invoking a past that was different from the present. These claims generally seek a higher status and respectability in the past, compared to the evident loss of standing in the few preceding centuries. Many pamphlets and books focused entirely on finding a historical explanation for the origin of the Sthanikas, their occupation throughout the centuries, and the reasons for their downfall.⁶ A problem that arises in analysing these sources is due to the interaction between cultural memory and textual material. It is impossible to pretend that oral narratives themselves are pristine records of the past, uninfluenced by the polemic that was published in the texts. Neither can we discount the possibility that these narratives are of a recent origin and were produced with an express purpose in mind. It is difficult to prise apart the two and is a futile task. Rather, it is useful to consider the oral narratives as texts as well, allowing us to uncover lineages of thought and networks of reference. The latter cannot be escaped since it is apparent that all sources borrow heavily from each other. A similar problem of mixture arises with respect to the elements of caste discourse. What is 'indigenous' caste discourse and which is the 'foreign' element in it?

The aim of this thesis is to study texts as well as personal narratives. The purpose in delving into narratives is not so much to use them to produce a fuller or more 'authentic' history, but to analyse their part in the construction of Sthanika discourse. Instead, it is to analyse the construction of Sthanika identity over the twentieth century and interrogate the use of histories and narratives in doing so. Due to this, and to the author's status as an insider to the community,

⁶ See the writings by NS Shiva Rao, MS Achyuta Sharma and VR Udyavara in the Bibliography.

it is necessarily anthropological as well. Despite the small size of the community, a history over two centuries would be too vast, too particular, and always remain incomplete. Instead, the historian needs to be selective, guided by threads of interest that connect people and discourses across this small region and across the last two centuries. The field, so to speak, consists of an outwardly expanding web of connections of people, starting from immediate family and their historical contexts. The methodology in this study borrows partially those used by previous historians as well as caste histories. In all these works, there is great emphasis laid on the word *sthanika* as well as related words and in speculating on its meaning. This study uses the same focus on names and their usage to scour the sources, especially colonial documents for any mention of the Sthanikas. The relative marginality of the caste necessitates such an approach to the archives. Often, concepts and associations conjured up by definitions of the Sthanikas are used to find material relevant to them as well as to draw connections with other contemporary peoples.

Themes and Questions

The setting for this study starts with direct British rule in 1799, which we can take to be the inauguration of modernity, or at least colonial modernity in this region. This was reflected in the changes to the revenue policies, the setting up of a village bureaucracy of *potails* and *shanbhogues*, i.e., headmen and accountants, with the Collector at the top of the organization, and a judiciary of policemen and magistrates.⁷ There were no urban centres except for

⁷ N Shyam Bhat, "Early Colonial Experience: 1792-1862." In *Poli – A Commemorative Volume for Canara 200*, (Mangalore: Deputy Commissioner, Dakshina Kannada District, 2000), 52-62.

Mangalore, and neither was there any industry. Looking at the gazetteer like District Manual, it is clear that the then district of South Canara was looked upon as “congenitally an agricultural district, and that it was not designed or destined for industries”.⁸ The historian B Surendra Rao views this as a thin veneer over British policy to develop the colony as an agricultural warehouse and market to support the industrialization of Britain. Reading the gazetteers, one may not be wrong to imagine modernity imposed by the state on an indifferent population in a backward district. Its adoption by Indian society only becomes visible in the twentieth century through new forms of living. While this might be an effect of the availability of sources, their presentation, and a relative lack of scholarship on Tulunadu modernity, the picture might not be very far from the truth. The district was far from Madras, much of it was covered by thick forests, and lines of communication were poor. The description of society in the gazetteer-like documents continued into the district gazetteers published by the state of Karnataka post-Independence and propagates a view of traditional society that has been little affected by modernity.⁹ There is some suggestion that social relations were shaken up only in the wake of land reforms of the 1970s and that some form of feudalism was entrenched until then.¹⁰ However, evidence such as peasant revolts,¹¹ the

⁸ B Surendra Rao, “Gazetteers in Colonial Subjectification: Sturrock’s Manual of South Canara,” in *Poli – A Commemorative Volume for Canara 200* (Mangalore: Deputy Commissioner, Dakshina Kannada District, 2000), 23.

⁹ To illustrate this point, the format for describing society in the chapter “The People” in the District Manual of 1894 is not different from the chapter “People” in the Karnataka State Gazetteer for South Kanara district. See Government of Karnataka, *Karnataka State Gazetteer: South Kanara District* (Bangalore: Government Press, 1973), 86-125.

¹⁰ “...Until about half a century ago this would have been an open ground, occupied by the chieftain’s militia...” in Solomon Benjamin, “Multilayered Urbanisation of the South Canara Territory,” in *Subaltern Urbanisation in India: An Introduction to the Dynamics of Ordinary Towns*, eds. Eric Denis and Marie-Hélène Zérah (New Delhi: Springer, 2017), 199.

¹¹ Dissatisfaction by ryots with the land revenue settlement flared up in 1809-11, 1830-31 and in the major rebellion of 1837. See N Shyam Bhat, “Early Colonial Experience: 1792-1862,” in *Poli – A Commemorative Volume for Canara 200* (Mangalore: Deputy Commissioner, Dakshina Kannada District, 2000), 55 and Purushottama Bilimale, *Amara Sulyada Raita Horata: 1834-1837 (Peasant Uprising of Sullia)* (Shivamogga: Aharnishi Prakashana, 2021).

development of Kannada print,¹² the publication of the first Kannada novel,¹³ the setting up of banks, co-operatives, private transport companies,¹⁴ and participation in nationalist resistance, among others, belies this view and paints a picture of a vibrant district that would go on to become an integral part of Karnataka. The transformation of Tulunadu and the Sthanikas under modernity is a key theme throughout this study.

Sources that refer to Sthanikas are available from the beginning of the nineteenth century, collected by scholar-administrators and ethnographers. The low status of the Sthanikas is recorded here, which enters the imperial lexicon through documents such as the gazetteers. The census may also be looked at for objectifying the people of the district and the province in a certain way. The question of caste seems to have fascinated the census commissioners, who dedicated pages on pages to it, while also giving them a headache. They bemoaned that it would need a “lifetime of labour to elucidate”.¹⁵ Its organization was also a difficult task. In the villages, *shanbhogues* were employed as primary enumerators since the *potails* were usually illiterate.¹⁶ While the travelogues of Francis Buchanan from 1801 already present the Sthanikas as a distinct group, they were repeatedly recorded as a caste marked by their peculiar origins and occupation as temple servants. This core part of their description was virtually unchanging for a century, and despite noting their protest at the description, it was summarily dismissed. The complicated interactions of various practices, such as census enumeration, its tabulation under an

¹² Prajwal Bhat, “How a German missionary fell in love with Kannada and started its first newspaper”, *The News Minute*, Dec. 26, 2017, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/how-german-missionary-fell-love-kannada-and-started-its-first-newspaper-73754>

¹³ Karthik Venkatesh, “The maiden novels of Indian languages”, *Mint*, Jan. 1, 2017, <https://www.livemint.com/Sundayapp/NT8liQtKNqbKuM4h0vr5gO/The-maiden-novels-of-Indian-languages.html>

¹⁴ The Goud Saraswat Brahmin caste is generally recognized for its initiative in banking and business. For the discussion on transport companies, see Benjamin, “Multilayered Urbanisation of the South Canara Territory,” 211-220.

¹⁵ WR Cornish, *Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1871 with Appendix* (Madras: Government Gazette Press, 1874), 116.

¹⁶ Cornish, *Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1871*, 59.

imagined theory of caste, and the collection of ethnographic accounts, produce many contradictions. The Moylar, and the Sthanikas, who according to Buchanan were a section of the former, would find themselves on either ends of the *varna* hierarchy in the census reports, but still be considered related groups in the gazetteers. Chapter 2 traces the Sthanikas as objects of ethnography in this literature. The lack of other sources leaves us with a piecemeal account of the Sthanikas in the nineteenth century, though narratives circulated within the community do make claims about tumultuous events in this period.

Compared to this relative silence, the records show an explosion of activity on the part of Sthanikas, both as individuals and as members of organizations in the early twentieth century. While a reading of the transformations of a particular small caste is difficult, we can study the wider changes in society. The turmoil caused by the British revenue policies could have had both positive and negative effects on them.¹⁷ The literate men among the Sthanikas seem to have taken to jobs in the village bureaucracy, many as *shanbhogues* and a few as *potails*. This can be supposed to have led to individual mobility, which later helped the entire caste to move up the ranks in terms of their education, and caste status. By the beginning of this century, there was a small elite which naturally took on leadership of the caste by forming a caste association, which primarily worked at improving their lot in education.¹⁸ Similar movements by the other castes in the other region need to be studied, which can place the trajectory of the Sthanikas in perspective. The associational life of the Sthanikas existed beyond the ‘secular’ Subrahmanya Sabha and also took shape in traditional institutions of the region, such as the temple and *matha*. A discussion of the Sthanikas as only a caste that was interested in material gains to be made in the public sphere would be limiting, without examining them as also subjects of a religious

¹⁷ Bhat, “Early Colonial Experience: 1792-1862”, 52-53.

¹⁸ See the section Subrahmanya Sabha and Shiva Brahmins in Chapter 3.

community. Looking at the ethnographic accounts, we are left with throwaway tidbits about their religious life, while many pages are devoted to describing the religion of the Brahmins intimately.¹⁹ The Sthanikas, claiming to be Brahmins of the same rank as the others, were conscious of their lack of religious education and sensibilities, and cultivated them through devotion to the temple at Pavanje, and to the Sringeri *matha*. The caste elites were now also educated enough to independently probe their history and background and use it to counter their representation in the official documents. Taking the example of NS Shiva Rao, a prolific pamphleteer, we also see the origins of some elements of caste discourse that would be reinforced later. These decades also produced many amateur scholars as well as the first professional historians from the district. Epigraphy was increasingly the staple of the historian, and the countless temple inscriptions were being subjected to close scrutiny. The historiography of the Sthanikas took a decisive turn with the study by BA Saletore resulting in a marked shift in the status accorded to them in texts produced in the twentieth century. Chapter 3 will explore the mobilization of the Sthanikas and the vicissitudes in their construction of a caste identity. Nationalist and regional historiography at the juncture of the production of caste histories needs to be examined closely for the give and take.

Many among the Sthanikas continued to write into the 1950s, 60s, and 70s on their rightful place in history and on the reasons for their fall in status. However, these were written by men to make assertions in a public sphere dominated by men. The voices of women and even those Sthanikas who were not prosperous, is not captured in these discourses. It is here that personal narratives can fill the gaps, and even help us to connect to much-repeated claims about

¹⁹ For instance, Edgar Thurston only notes this in two lines, that “they are generally Sivites [*sic*], and wear the sacred thread. Their special deities are Venkatramana and Ganapati.” See Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India Vol. VI— P T O S* (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 403.

the Sthanikas in colonial ethnographies, with which the intellectuals never bothered to engage. The fall of the Sthanikas has not been investigated by historians, and here again, we need to turn to narratives to hear the various kinds of arguments made about it. While there is some self-criticism, external forces such as the newly arrived British are also blamed for effecting their change of fortune. Just as colonial ethnography made the Sthanikas by objectifying them, they were now claiming to have been unmade in the same century. Chapter 4 studies a few different but important elements of Sthanika caste discourse. By now, the Sthanika voice, as expressed for example by MS Achyuta Sharma, was confidently placed on its perch and could allege that the rival sect had conspired to bring about their downfall.

The Sthanikas in Colonial Ethnography

Introduction

The Sthanikas are a caste unique to coastal Karnataka, specifically the linguistic and cultural zone known as Tulunadu. This region was relatively isolated from upland Karnataka by the Western Ghats and has been seen as a region distinguished by traditions such as spirit worship and serpent worship, its social fabric of mainly matrilineal castes, and its green and fertile landscape. However, the region also has a strong Brahminical presence¹, mainly associated with its numerous centres of pilgrimage that attract many devotees and where some rituals unique to Tulunadu are performed. Among these are many medieval-era temples which are ascribed great sanctity and antiquity. Many castes derive their traditional identity through some association with the temples, especially in providing services of various kinds. The Sthanikas claim to be Tulu Brahmins, numbering among many Brahmin castes. While this claim is more or less conceded today, it was denied in the past, marked by exclusion from priesthood in the temples, the relegation to other lowly duties, and other practices recalled by Sthanikas as discriminatory. Thus, it naturally invites the question of caste mobility that the Sthanikas affected in the recent past, how it was achieved, and through what means. To narrate a social history of the Sthanikas, Indian voices are heard only from the early twentieth century. This however does not mean that it is preceded by a deafening silence. Rather, they appear as colonial subjects as well as objects of

¹ The relative importance of Brahmins and Brahminism may be surmised from their relatively high population in the district. To take one instance, in the Madras census of 1871, Brahmins constituted 3% of the population in the entire province while South Canara had the highest population of Brahmins as a percentage of the population at 11.8. See WR Cornish, *Supplementary Tables of the Census Results of Madras Presidency for 1871, Vol-II* (Madras: Government Gazette Press, 1874), 36.

an Orientalist curiosity. In 1799, Tipu Sultan was defeated in the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War and the tract of coastal Karnataka entered Madras Presidency as the territory of Canara.² Thus, a neat line can be drawn in the history of Tulunadu which separates modernity, colonial rule, and the nineteenth century from the pre-modern or early modern past. This makes it possible to investigate society in general, and the Sthanikas in particular under common paradigms associated with colonialism and modernity in scholarship. This chapter intends to investigate the sources in which the Sthanikas appear from the beginning of the nineteenth century, namely ethnographic accounts, the census records, and a peculiar type of source known as *kaifiyats*. In addition, the representation of the Sthanikas needs to be investigated, in the long process of their ‘objectification’³, where they came to be entirely defined by the colonialists, repeatedly and in a consistent manner. This evidently had a long life, in the way in which it evoked response from both Sthanika individuals and organizations in the twentieth century, which will be described in later chapters.

The earliest exemplar of a systematic colonial survey of this region, the travelogue of Francis Buchanan from 1801 makes a mention of the Sthanikas as performing menial tasks in the temples.⁴ Just as this newly acquired province was being made legible to the gaze of the British, the Sthanikas enter their vocabulary. Apart from a few scattered mentions, the Sthanikas appear again under this name and a few others starting with the Census of 1871. It was not until the last decade of the century that a gazetteer-like ‘District Manual’ was composed by John Sturrock which again takes a great interest in naming, classifying, and organizing the diverse people living

² N Shyam Bhat, *South Kanara (1799-1860): A Study in Colonial Administration and Regional Response* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1998), 4.

³ Bernard Cohn, “The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,” in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 229.

⁴ Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar, Vol. III* (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies / Black, Parry & Kingsbury, 1807), 31.

in the district.⁵ By this time, colonial ethnography was closely allied with the emerging discipline of anthropology and ‘race’ science.⁶ Caste, along with race were eyed with a new curiosity, that was part scholarly and partly to do with administrative concerns. Edgar Thurston headed the publication of a mammoth set of volumes in 1909 with accounts of varying length and quality about hundreds of named groups in South India.⁷ Not just the Sthanikas, but a number of other castes and affiliations can be read in these works and allow us to infer connections as well as discern difference. Most importantly, documents such as the census reports and ethnographic surveys allow us to historicize elements of caste identity that are often taken for granted.

Early Impressions

In February of 1800, Francis Buchanan, a servant of the East India Company in Bengal received a special mission from the Governor-General.⁸ He was to embark on a long journey to make “enquiries” “throughout the dominions of the present Raja of Mysore, and the country acquired by the Company, in the late war, from the Sultan”. The primary interest was stated as the determination of the state of agriculture in this country and in drawing a comparison with Bengal. However, the directives also state that he was to collect information about cattle, farms, valuable commodities like pepper and sandalwood, mines and minerals, manufacturing, and most importantly, the people. The report in the form of the travelogue provides ample information about all these as he was informed or as he observed personally. Starting in Madras, he made a

⁵ Rao, “Gazetteers in Colonial Subjectification: Sturrock’s Manual of South Canara”, 19.

⁶ For a detailed study of colonial ethnography and its scientism, see Meena Radhakrishna, “Of Apes and Ancestors: Evolutionary Science and Colonial Ethnography,” in *The Indian Historical Review*, vol. XXXIII no. 1, (2006), 1-23.

⁷ Radhakrishna, “Of Apes and Ancestors”, 3.

⁸ Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar, Vol. I* (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies / Black, Parry & Kingsbury, 1807), viii-xiii.

circuitous journey through the kingdom of Mysore, the district of Malabar, and entered Canara on January 15, 1801.⁹ His reporting about the people is brimming with detail, and the similarities with ethnographic accounts produced a century later are striking. In contrast to the surveys of Mysore and Malabar, the section on Canara is replete with tables and figures concerning the people, agricultural produce, and trade, indicating that detailed information was already being collected by the new administration. A section called “Kaneh Shumareh, or statement of Casts [*sic*], Men, Boys, Women, and Girls” provides a table with 122 “Casts or Trades” beginning with the “Brahmans” and enumerates even the most marginal groups with a handful of people counted under it.¹⁰ Each group is supplemented by a description in few words, which are occupational in nature. Starting with the “Brahmans”, the “Stanicas [*sic*]” are listed as the sixth entry, separate from the Brahmins and described as “employed in low offices at heathen temples”.¹¹ It seems they numbered around 4000 people in all, compared to around 36,000 Brahmins and around 52,000 each of Bunts and Billavas, who are today considered the dominant cultivating castes. Curiously, the “Moylar” who number around 700 are described as “similar to the Stanica, No. 6”.¹² As Buchanan journeys through the country, he describes various castes as part of the narrative, including the “Tuluva Brahmins” who “consider themselves as the proper lords of the country”.¹³

Following the description of a few of the major ‘Sudra’ castes and the customs peculiar to them including matrilineal inheritance, Buchanan gives an account of “a very singular custom

⁹ Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar, Vol. III* (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies / Black, Parry & Kingsbury, 1807), 1.

¹⁰ Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar, Vol. III*, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

which has given origin to a cast named Moylar.”¹⁴ A woman belonging to the “four pure casts”¹⁵ who either wants to leave her husband or is a widow may approach the temple and eat “some of the rice that is offered to the idol”.¹⁶ The local officers of government and members of her caste are assembled who inquire into her state. If she is Brahmin, she is given the option of living “either in the temple or out of its precincts”.¹⁷ If she chooses the former, she gets a daily allowance of rice, sweeps the temple and fans the idol, and must “confine her amours to the Brahmans”.¹⁸ For the Brahmin women who live outside the temple, which is also the only option available to women of the other castes, they instead pay the temple an annual rent.¹⁹ The male children of all these women are supposedly called ‘Moylar’, but those descended from Brahmin women are “fond of assuming the title of Stanika [*sic*] and wear the Brahmanical thread”.²⁰ Apparently the Moylar differ much in their customs and try to imitate the castes to which their mothers belonged. Thus, the “descendants of a Brahmany [*sic*] prostitute wear the thread, eat no animal food, drink no spirituous liquors, and make marks on their faces and bodies similar to those which are used by the sacred cast”.²¹ They are however not permitted to read the sacred texts and are “utterly despise[d]” by the Brahmins “who will not act as their Gurus to give them Upadesa”.²² However, the Brahmins will attend to the ceremonies of the Moylar and accept from them both “Dhana and Dharma”.²³ The ‘Stanikas’ supposedly procure employment in the temples and live about them, sweeping, sprinkling cow-dung mixed with water, carry torches

¹⁴ For the entire discussion, see the two paragraphs devoted to “Singular customs of the Moylar” in *Ibid.*, 65-66.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

before the gods and perform “other similar low offices”.²⁴ The others take to agriculture, and many learn to “keep accompts [*sic*]”²⁵. The daughters of the Brahmin woman are supposed to be either brought up “to live like their mothers” or given in marriage to the Stanikas.²⁶ As a final tidbit, Buchanan is surprised that inheritance flows from father to son where “the chastity of the women might be considered as doubtful”²⁷, perhaps seeming like an aberration against the predominant matriliney in most of the Tulu castes. This seemingly comprehensive account is the first mention of the Sthanikas in colonial documents and is significant in more ways than one. As shall be seen, some elements of the description cling to them for more than a century which they try to shake off with much effort. However, more striking is the fact that most details accord with the material reality of the Sthanikas as can be discerned from biographies, oral narratives, and through the interstices of the caste discourse that they developed later. Of these, the salient ones are that the Sthanikas were not Brahmins but had dubious origins in the community of temple servants.²⁸ They are mainly occupied in menial tasks at the temples, are forbidden to learn the scriptures, and occupy a ritual status lower than the Brahmans of pure descent, which precludes them from priesthood. Finally, the significance of this account is its very early date, which attests to the fact that the Sthanikas were identified distinctly already by the dawn of the nineteenth century and their social stratification must have been long in the making. It is important to keep this in mind when Sthanika caste discourse discusses the formative role of that century and colonialism in their fall from grace.

²⁴ Ibid., 65.

²⁵ Ibid., 65-66.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 66.

²⁸ Perhaps the temple was seen as one of the few ‘public’ spaces where people of many castes mingled together. It is also likely that buildings and habitation around the temples were different in the past and have been cleared away over time.

Buchanan in the course of his journey arrives at Udupi in February 1801 where he gives a detailed account of the “Tuluva Brahmans of the Madual [*sic*] sect”, after having assembled those who were “reckoned the most eminent in their knowledge”.²⁹ This is a detailed account and provides a surprising amount of information, starting with the account of “Parasu Rama [*sic*], who created Tuluva for their use”.³⁰ Indeed, most of this information is repeated in the district manuals, gazetteers, and ethnographic surveys to come. Buchanan presents this account as that pertaining to all Tulu Brahmans, but it is predominantly concerned with the caste identified later and today as the Shivalli Brahmans, who also happen to be the principal antagonists in Sthanika caste discourse. The account of the Madhva Brahmans can be juxtaposed to Buchanan’s descriptions of the ‘Smartal’ and ‘Sri Vaishnavam’ i.e., the Smarta and Sri Vaishnava Brahmans respectively. In the course of his journeys, he had encountered the latter two sects in the Tamil and Kannada countries and had described them in great detail.³¹ On the whole, Buchanan shows great interest in the Brahmans above all other groups and also seeks to align other castes lower in the *varna* order as disciples of one of these three sects. In this chapter, only a few points will be mentioned which appear salient to further discussion of Sthanika identity and claims on the past. Firstly, he states that like other Smartas, many of the Tulu Brahmans continue to follow Shankaracharya’s doctrines and follow the guru of Sringeri³², while the Madhvas i.e., the Shivallis follow the doctrines of Madhvacharya and his lineage of disciples at Udupi. Secondly,

²⁹ For the complete discussion, see *Ibid.*, 90-100.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ In his description of Conjeevaram i.e., Kanchipuram, just outside Madras, which contains a major temple each to Shiva and Vishnu, he notes “the worshippers of the two gods, who are of different sects, are very apt to fall into disputes, occasioning abusive language, and followed by violence; so that the collectors have sometimes been obliged to have recourse to the fear of the bayonet, to prevent the controversy from producing bad effects”. See Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, Vol. I, 13.

³² *Ibid.*, 91.

that the Madhvas hold that “there is one supreme God, Narayana or Vishnu”³³, but also believe that both Brahma and Shiva ought to be worshipped. Finally, he records that sectarian animosity is greatest between the Madhvas and Sri Vaishnavas, that the Smartas though they follow Shiva in the main, “agree much better with the Madual” and “in Tuluva and Malayala [*sic*] especially, these two live on tolerable terms”.³⁴ In Tulunadu, it is not uncommon for temples to house both gods or for temples to Shiva and Vishnu to be built near each other.³⁵ It is significant that Buchanan made these observations since they refer to a few of the core ‘historical’ arguments made by Sthanikas later regarding their difference from the other Brahmins and in the sectarian othering that supposedly led to their social isolation.

Buchanan’s travelogue has been interrogated in some detail due to the richness of the information provided and the circularity of information that will become evident when we see later colonial documents. Before moving to these, it is necessary to mention a series of documents that were collected in the early nineteenth century as part of the colonial knowledge gathering exercise, but which were authored by literate and educated ‘natives’. These are known to have been gathered by Colonel Colin Mackenzie up to 1818 when he took the collections to Calcutta, adding to them till his death in 1821.³⁶ The Mackenzie collection contains 41 *kaifiyats* belonging to the South Canara region.³⁷ In 1983, K Kushalappa Gowda and K Chinnappa Gowda transcribed these into modern Kannada print and edited them.³⁸ Rev. Ronald Cutinha considers them as mainly belonging to the *sthala-purana* genre, while acknowledging that they reveal

³³ Ibid., 92.

³⁴ Ibid., 94.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Rev. Ronald Cutinha, “Socio-Religious Life in South Kanara: Perspectives from Kannada Kaifiyats,” in *Poli – A Commemorative Volume for Canara 200*, (Mangalore: Deputy Commissioner, Dakshina Kannada District, 2000), 35.

³⁷ *Kaifiyat* is an Arabic-Persian word which means a statement or a description. Ibid., 36.

³⁸ K Kushalappa Gowda and K Chinnappa Gowda, *Dakshina Kannada Jilleya Kaifiyattugalu (Kaifiyats of Dakshina Kannada)* (Ujire: Sri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara Pustaka Prakashana Male, 1983), iv-v.

“geographical, political, social, religious, and economic facts of different localities of South Kanara district”.³⁹ He has attempted to highlight aspects of contemporary social and religious life that can be discerned from these *kaifiyats*. A few belong to temples, a few others to the *mathas* of Udupi while most concern the major *maganes*.⁴⁰ Cutinha has referred to the presence of Sthanikas in the margins in two *kaifiyats*, namely the “Yelluru Devasthanada Kaifiyat” (the kaifiyat of the Yelluru temple) and the “Chautarasugala Kaifiyat” (the *kaifiyat* of the Chauta chiefs).⁴¹ In the former, “Sthanika Anantakrishna” is mentioned among the ‘officers’ present at its writing.⁴² He appears towards the end of a list starting with the *magane shanbhogue*, the temple *shanbhogue*, the priests of the temple referred to by their designation as *tantri*, *bhatta*⁴³, and *kilushanti*, and he is followed only by the *padarti*.⁴⁴ The meaning of these terms interested P Gururaja Bhat who establishes through a study of inscriptions that these refer to various temple duties and are of considerable antiquity. In addition, a few of these terms are still in use today. Thus, it can be inferred that the word ‘sthanika’ here most likely refers to a designation since it occurs in a series of other such vocations. In the “Chautarasugala Kaifiyat”, there is a solitary mention of a “Stanika [*sic*] Naranappa” who was entrusted with the office of *shanbhogue* at the *bukkasa*, glossed as treasury.⁴⁵ From this, Cutinha infers that the Sthanikas were not necessarily confined to temple bureaucracy but could be appointed to other offices based on their

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ An administrative unit, comprising a group of villages that had persisted from the previous setup under the Vijayanagar empire and the Ikkeri Nayakas into the twentieth century.

⁴¹ Ibid., 38-39.

⁴² Gowda and Gowda, *Dakshina Kannada Jilleya Kaifiyattugalu (Kaifiyats of Dakshina Kannada)*, 175.

⁴³ Bhatta is also a popular surname among the Brahmins, meaning a priest. It might have been used here as a name and might not denote an occupation.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Cutinha, “Socio-Religious Life in South Kanara: Perspectives from Kannada Kaifiyats”, 38.

qualifications.⁴⁶ However, the usage of the term ‘stanika’ seems to point to a caste identification. There is one other *kaifiyat* that mentions a Sthanika, and this is the “Kundapure Kaifiyat” which concerns the famous temple of Manjunatha at Dharmasthala, a prominent centre of pilgrimage today.⁴⁷ It describes the conduct of duties at the temple headed by the Hegde dynasty of chiefs who are Jains. He is said to be assisted by four *buddhivantas*⁴⁸, who are listed by their name and the specific caste from which they should be appointed. It seems that “Delampadi” of the “Stanika jati” is second only to the Hegde since he is referred to as belonging to “the second house”.⁴⁹ The others are similarly listed as “Kotanna” and “Kambali Banta” of the “Jaina jati” and “Mannonitaya” belonging to the “Shivalli Brahmana[s]”, and occupying the third, fifth and fourth houses respectively.⁵⁰ Here, ‘stanika’ is clearly used as a caste i.e., *jati* and it is clear that they were not included under the Brahmins, unlike the Shivallis. The ‘office’ of Delampadi still exists at the temple and is even now appointed according to tradition from among the Sthanikas, who assumes that title on appointment for life.⁵¹ The *kaifiyats* have been discussed here with the aim of expanding the list of sources which mention the Sthanikas, and which might enable a fuller understanding of their role. However, they have not been studied separately and await further scrutiny. The editors of the volume have commented briefly on the bearing of the *kaifiyats* to the study of history.⁵² They acknowledge that those that narrate contemporary events might be apt sources for history compared to those that aim to describe a long arc, such as a

⁴⁶ Ibid., 39. Also, it seems that the Bokkasa family of Moodabidri is still extant and is the same family to which the above-mentioned officer might belong. Karun Rao Belle (Secretary, Sri Subrahmanya Sabha), in discussion with the author, February 2023.

⁴⁷ Gowda and Gowda, *Dakshina Kannada Jilleya Kaifiyattugalu (Kaifiyats of Dakshina Kannada)*, 153-155.

⁴⁸ Literally, a wise man in Kannada, and could refer to a figure of responsibility. Ibid., 154,

⁴⁹ Ibid., 155.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 154-155.

⁵¹ Karun Rao Belle (Secretary, Sri Subrahmanya Sabha), in discussion with the author, January 2023.

⁵² Gowda and Gowda, *Dakshina Kannada Jilleya Kaifiyattugalu (Kaifiyats of Dakshina Kannada)*, 91-93.

dynasty in the *kaifiyat* of the Chauta chiefs, where there is doubt about dates, regnal years and the historicity of its characters. However, history is not only a chronological narrative, but also includes events and their effect on society. Here, the *kaifiyats* complement the picture of society gleaned from sources such as inscriptions in a colourful and entertaining manner.⁵³ As far as the Sthanikas are concerned, it provides clues about their social existence that are mostly missing from the colonial accounts.

Entering the Census and Gazetteers

The impact of the census in the formation of modern caste identities has been investigated in great detail by many scholars. Rosalind O'Hanlon traces this interest to the work of David Washbrook who looked at caste through the lens of political and social history of a particular region and the impact of the colonial state on it.⁵⁴ Bernard Cohn has described the process of objectification of India, through a study of the census structure and its function. By this, he means the construction of Indian society, its history and culture as a 'thing' where "they can stand back and look at themselves, their ideas, their symbols and culture and see it as an entity."⁵⁵ Crucial to this process, he believes were the many instances in which Indians were forced to answer questions about themselves and explain their social relations, culture, rituals and so on. It also provided a means for Indians to ask questions of themselves, and since the British tried to order caste in terms of social precedence, the Indians were also interested in their

⁵³ Ibid., 93.

⁵⁴ Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Caste and its Histories in Colonial India: A Reappraisal." *Modern Asian Studies Volume 51 Special Issue 2: New Directions in Social and Economic History: Essays in Honour of David Washbrook* (March 2017), 433.

⁵⁵ Cohn, "The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia", 229.

placement in this table.⁵⁶ Buchanan's travelogue has already been seen and can be understood as a precursor to the all-India census. The estimation of population, the delineation of villages, the recording of ages, and the identification of castes, were all processes fraught with difficulties, and developed over the years through various strategies. These were liable to give inconsistent results, which we shall see in this section. The census and its handling of the caste question was crucial to the theoretical view of Indian social systems developed by administrators and social scientists, many of whom had worked as census commissioners.⁵⁷ Cohn contends that much of the scholarly apparatus is still founded on work done as part of the census operations.

In the inaugural census of Madras, the question of caste was concerned with identifying the main divisions and subdivisions among the Hindus under which given caste names could be placed by the census enumerators. The committee accepted "without question" the main divisions along *varna* lines i.e., Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Sudras and Out-castes.⁵⁸ However, as it was anticipated that most people would be returned under the last two categories, the committee felt the need to provide subdivisions that would be more intelligible. Thus, further categories such as the agricultural or cultivating castes, shepherd and pastoral castes, artisan castes etc. were made. Among these, notice may be drawn to a category called the Mixed Castes, defined as "chiefly of religious sects renouncing caste-distinction, and connected with temple service and worship".⁵⁹ This will be of import later, relating to the assumptions that might have influenced the acceptance of certain caste definitions. This census also adopted the practice of assigning to each of these categories the name of the principal caste in the Tamil region, so that

⁵⁶ Ibid., 230.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 241-242.

⁵⁸ Cornish, *Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency*, 117.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

the Mixed Castes were also called the ‘Satanis’.⁶⁰ Turning to the tables, the Brahmins are divided into only 20 major groups, largely based on region and sect, for the sake of presenting statistics. Among these there are ‘Smarta’ and ‘Madhva Brahmins’. Supplementary tables provide a list of subdivisions in each linguistic zone of the Presidency, with no population figures. The name ‘sthanika’ appears only in the “Canarese [*sic*] Schedules” i.e., Kannada forms, constituting five of the 80 Brahmin subdivisions.⁶¹ The names of these subdivisions which are prefixed to ‘Sthanika’ are Ayakuta, Ekara, Rayakuta, Subrahmanya and Tamballa. Of these, the Subrahmanya Sthanikas must refer to the Sthanikas of Tulunadu, as Sturrock’s Manual will make clear. The names of the other four Sthanika groups are not intelligible, and in fact disappear altogether from the 1881 census onwards. Some of the other subdivisions relevant to Tulunadu are ‘Brahmana Haiga [*sic*]’, ‘Havika’, ‘Kota’, ‘Koteshvara’, ‘Madhva Brahman’, ‘Madhva Sivali [*sic*]’, ‘Sivali’, ‘Tulu Brahman’, and ‘Vaishnava Sivali’.⁶² The name Sthanika does not appear in any of the other schedules i.e., Tamil, Telugu, or Malayalam. A name called ‘Tambala’ appears as a subdivision of the Satanis from the Kannada schedules, which closely resembles the name

⁶⁰ There is much explication of the Satanis as a people and as a division carrying the meaning ‘mixed castes’, which makes the latter seem a little artificial. Cornish explains that “two great religious sects, the followers of reformers, who practically renounced caste distinctions, have been included under the term Satani”, a decision made by the Census Commissioners. The Vaishnavites among them are deemed to be “Satanis or Sanatanas proper, who are the disciples of Chaitanya, a reformer of the fifteenth century”. The corresponding reformed Shaivite sect are said to “follow the teachings of Basava and are known as ‘Jangams’ or ‘Virasaivas’”. Today, the Virasaivas would be recognized as Lingayats in Karnataka, among whom the Jangamas are preachers and mendicants. According to Cornish, the Satanis are made up of persons of all classes, and properly speaking they do not belong to any caste. However due to the tendency of religious sects to harden into castes, they acquired that status and are included in the census as “mixed castes, that cannot be classified with any of the recognized and defined orders of the people”. In terms of occupation, they are said to be mostly “religious mendicants, priests of inferior temples, minstrels, sellers of flowers used as offerings etc.” and that they have “probably largely recruited their numbers by the admission into their ranks of individuals who have been excommunicated from higher castes.” There are said to be about 200 names entered under this category in the schedules. Of these, the Satanis are “really very few in number”, and most of the mixed castes are “a nondescript people devoted to religion or temple service”. See Cornish, *Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency*, 159-160.

⁶¹ There are respectively 43, 80, and 20 names of Brahmin subdivisions in the Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam schedules respectively. See Table No. 16 in Cornish, *Supplementary Tables for 1871, Vol-II* (Madras: Government Gazette Press, 1874), 108-109.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Tamballa Sthanika.⁶³ The other name bestowed to us by Buchanan i.e., Moylar, is not found as a caste name, but appears in the list of subdivisions of the ‘Pariah’ category i.e., the outcastes. The names ‘Moyili’ and ‘Tulu Moyili’ most probably denote the group mentioned by Buchanan.⁶⁴ Listed purely as names, there is no other information on their classification.

In 1881, the Madras census shot up to eight published volumes. There is also a change in the tone, pointing to a dissatisfaction with the previous census and an attempt to exert the fullest of energies at coming up with a better classificatory system of caste. The Census Commissioner notes that the present classification “although wonderfully good as a beginning is not the best possible”.⁶⁵ He found that due to its reliance on “the theory of hereditary Caste-Occupation [*sic*]”, it is not in accordance with the “latest development of the Caste System.”⁶⁶ He thinks that caste as occupation has been weakened by modernity and needs to be replaced by a better scheme. The instructions then, were to “record more minutely than on the previous occasion, the numerous sub-divisions of caste.”⁶⁷ The boundaries determined by intermarriage and interdining are used as ‘real and practical’ discriminants. However, he adds that sects and caste distinctions arising only out of sect, language or region are also noted. In empirical terms, the list of caste names went up six-fold, from 3208 in 1871 to 19,044. The list is called “exhaustive; however closely one name may resemble another, it is entered.”⁶⁸ The older scheme is retained

⁶³ As a caste listed under the Satani division, there are population figures for Tambalas in each of the districts. They numbered the most in Kurnool, Bellary and Cuddappah districts. See Table No. 11 in *Ibid.*, 75-77. These are areas where Telugu is spoken predominantly today, with only Bellary included as a border district in present-day Karnataka. However, the Tambalas also appear as a subdivision of Satanis in the supplementary table of names, only in the Kannada schedules, indicating that they might have been an entirely Kannada speaking community. See Table No. 16 in *Ibid.*, 123-124. Tambalas also existed in South Canara district.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 129-130. The Pariahs seem to correspond with the group that would be later called Untouchables, and Dalits.

⁶⁵ Lewis Mclver, *Imperial Census of 1881: Operations and Results in the Presidency of Madras, Vol. I* (Madras: The Government Press, 1883), 101.

⁶⁶ Mclver, *Imperial Census of 1881: Madras, Vol. I*, 101.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

superficially but is now uniformly divided into a ‘main-head’ and a list of ‘sub-heads’, with corresponding numerical ‘order’ and ‘sub-order’ respectively. In the tables, the caste names are listed alphabetically, classified by order and sub-order, and provide a list of the ‘charges’ i.e., administrative regions⁶⁹ in which these names were entered. In the Kannada schedules, there are two names ‘Brahman Sthanika’ as well as ‘Sthanika’ which count around 600 and 100 people under it respectively.⁷⁰ There are a handful of people counted as ‘Kumbla Sthanika’, ‘Iyakkad Sthanika’⁷¹, ‘Patali Yane [sic] Sthanika’⁷² and only two women counted as ‘Sthanika Jati Ketta’.⁷³ However, each of these groups has been categorized under the main-head Brahman and the sub-head ‘Smarta Brahman’. Confusingly, ‘Brahman Smarta’ appears also as a caste name, in addition to its usage as the name of a sub-head. However, the population against it is around 40,000, compared to only 2000 in 1871 for South Canara.⁷⁴ The other Tulu Brahmin castes, under different variations of the name are also listed with small numbers, and are classified under the sub-heads Smarta Brahman, ‘Brahman Vaishnava’ and ‘Konkana Brahman’. Interestingly, the Shivallis also enter the Smarta category instead of being listed as Madhva. ‘Brahman Madhva’ carries around 15,000 people as compared to none at all in South Canara in 1871. Moyilis are still classified under the main-head ‘Pariah’ and number around 2500.⁷⁵ By juxtaposing the

⁶⁹ The units under a Tahsildar or Deputy Tahsildar. Except for Kollegal, all the other charges belong to South Canara district.

⁷⁰ Lewis Mclver, *Imperial Census of 1881: Operations and Results in the Presidency of Madras, Vol. IV – Final Census Tables – Provincial Series – Caste* (Madras: The Government Press, 1883), Table VIII.B.

⁷¹ We shall encounter the Kumbla/Kumble Sthanikas again, the appellation being that of a region. Iyakkad might be another place, the returnees all belonging to the ‘Nileshwar’ charge. Both Kumble and Nileshwar belong to the present day Kasargod district of Kerala. However, Kumble had been included within the traditional boundary of Tulunadu while Nileshwar belonged properly to Malabar.

⁷² It reads Patali alias Sthanika, in Kannada. This equates the two names. There is also a separate name which reads only Patali, and also includes only a handful of people.

⁷³ ‘Jati ketta’ in Kannada means outcaste, or those who have been excommunicated.

⁷⁴ See Mclver, *Imperial Census of 1881: Madras, Vol. IV*, Table VIII.B and Cornish, *Supplementary Tables for 1871, Vol-II*, 68.

⁷⁵ Mclver, *Imperial Census of 1881: Madras, Vol. IV*, Table VIII.B.

reports from 1871 with those of 1881, it is clear that there was great confusion about caste names and their classification and many contradictions. It makes better sense to view it as a process of change, towards rigidity but allowing for a change of name or precedence in some cases. As with each caste name, category and subdivision, their placement is open to question. What the census instead informs us, is of the contemporary perception of the various groups. As Cohn reminds us, the development of a classification system for castes rested on “two interlocked but operationally separate problems”.⁷⁶ The enumerator asked the actual question to the individual in the village, while the answer was interpreted by a clerk or supervisor for the census at a higher administrative level. Cohn himself suspects that in most cases, the enumerators did not ask the questions and filled in the forms based on their own knowledge of their neighbours.⁷⁷ There was also, a persistent belief from the beginning of the census operations that an all-India classification of castes could be developed.⁷⁸ The 1881 census attempted to make it more ‘scientific’ i.e., it used the numerical ‘coding’. It was perhaps driven by a desire to develop a model that all provinces would follow, enabling comparison across them. As has been mentioned, the idea of caste was still difficult to pin down and was being reworked under different assumptions. Commenting on the Satanis, the 1881 report calls it “one of the most unsatisfactory parts of the classification, and it would be difficult to show any principle upon which these have been grouped”, with 17 sub-heads and 1400 names.⁷⁹ ‘Tamballa’⁸⁰ is one of the sub-heads listed and its population had almost halved since 1871. Following this list, the

⁷⁶ Cohn, “The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia”, 243.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁷⁸ Mclver, *Imperial Census of 1881: Madras, Vol. I*, 111.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Previously, the Satani caste had been spelled ‘Tambala’ and the Brahmin subdivision had been spelled ‘Tamballa Sthanika’.

Commissioner wryly comments that “what feature is common to all these, it is not presumed to suggest.”⁸¹

The census of 1891 and following decades will be discussed in the next chapter, pursuing the theme of attempts toward upward mobility and conscious self-fashioning, possibly pushed by nascent forms of caste association. There are clues regarding this in the District Manual of 1894 and in its account of the Sthanikas. Despite the two previous census reports accepting their classification as Brahmins, Sturrock disagreed. In the chapter “The People”, the castes are listed in approximate social precedence, but also sometimes grouping similar castes together, starting with Brahmins and their 12 subdivisions.⁸² The most detailed account is due to the Shivalli Brahmins, who are treated as the principal Tulu Brahmins and said to be almost all followers of Madhvacharya, with the customs of the other Brahmin castes stated in comparison with those of the former. Like most other accounts in this volume, it describes their religion, occupations, sartorial distinctiveness, diet, and significantly, the practices around marriage, conjugality and the treatment of widows, interspersing quotations from other European or native observers. Immediately following the Brahmins but before the group called Traders, are listed the class called ‘Temple Servants’, among whom there are four castes – the ‘Stanikas’, Devadigas, Moyilis or Moylars, and Sappaligs.⁸³ The very first line in their description records the supposed origins of the Stanikas, which is equated with “Manu’s *golaka*”.⁸⁴ There are said to be two subdivisions, “Subramania [*sic*] Stanikas and Kumbla Stanikas”, but “it is not clear” whether they

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² J. Sturrock, *Madras District Manuals: South Canara, Volume I* (Madras; Government Press, 1894), 144-154.

⁸³ Sturrock, *District Manuals: South Canara*, 154-155.

⁸⁴ The alleged social practice had been related to Sanskrit texts, namely the Manusmriti, as a sanctioned alliance though of a lower class. Described here as “descendants of Brahmins by Brahmin widows and outcaste Brahmin women”, any mention of temple women is omitted. However, the description of Moyilis retains that association. Ibid., 154.

are endogamous groups.⁸⁵ In the other details, they resemble the Brahmins and it is said that in customs, they are almost the same as the Kota Brahmins. However, the most significant portion relates to their caste claims. They are said to “now claim to be Siva Brahmins, forcibly dispossessed of authority by the Madhvas”, the latter of whom could only be the Shivallis in the context.⁸⁶ Also, Stanika is denied as a caste name but “indicates their profession as managers of temples, with the title of Deva Stanika.” Sturrock however notes that the duties of the Stanikas are “clearly those of the temple servants, namely collecting flowers, sweeping the interiors of temples, looking after the lamps, cleaning the temple vessels, ringing bells and the like.”⁸⁷ He states that their claim is not “generally conceded”, perhaps by the Brahmins, but we can infer neither by Sturrock himself. Many are said to be landowners and farmers and a few educated men had become priests. Turning to the following three castes, they are all said to be related groups known by different names. The Devadigas are said to be a class of servants, mostly musicians in the temples. “They are also known as Moyilis”, of whom it is said that they are “descendants of children of women attached to the temples”, and that “their ranks are even now swelled in this manner”.⁸⁸ Their duties are said to be similar to those of the Stanikas. It is here that the identification of the Moyilis or Moylars becomes possible, by being linked as a subgroup belonging to the much larger Devadiga caste.⁸⁹ This group was already legible in earlier surveys and censuses. Buchanan listed them as “Davadygar (Devagaica)” who are only described as musicians and numbered around 8000 in 1801.⁹⁰ In the censuses of 1871 and 1881, they had

⁸⁵ It is interesting to have the author admit their ignorance of some ethnographic detail, which indicates a regime in which knowledge of the people was as yet incomplete, despite what was projected in the gazetteers. Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid. Note the supposed contemporariness of the practice.

⁸⁹ It is also recognizable as part of a personal name. The most famous example might be M Veerappa Moili, the prominent Congress politician and ex-chief minister of Karnataka.

⁹⁰ Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, Vol. III, 5.

been classed under the category or main-head Vannian, meaning agricultural labourers, and had been counted as around 21,500 and 19,000 people respectively.⁹¹

The census reports and gazetteer show marked differences in the enumeration of castes, and in the compilation of ethnographic material for official district ‘manuals’⁹² by assembling portions from disparate sources. If the Sthanikas and Moylars or Devadigas are classed as similar in origin and occupation, the census tables put them at either extremes of the *varna* hierarchy. Even Sturrock is ambiguous in placing them after the Brahmins, leaving the question of their *varna* open. They are connected to the latter through the temples, and the Sthanikas are described as similar to the Brahmins in custom. There is scant information about the Devadigas, which is common with the other castes placed later, and thus lower in relative order. The example of the Satanis is taken up to attempt an explanation of the alacrity with which certain notions such as ‘mixed castes’ might have been entertained. It is possible that the acceptance of this category and a certain notion of the temple and religious communities as a crossroads where mixing could take place, lies behind the continued inscription of Sthanikas as a kind of half-caste. As this example also shows with groups called Tambala, Tamballa or Tamballa Sthanika, there might have been a slippage between lower ranks of Brahmins and the larger class of temple servants. As we shall see, BA Saletore was piqued by these similarities thrown up in ethnography and attempted to engage with the question.

Objects of Ethnography

⁹¹ See Table No. 11 in Cornish, *Supplementary Tables for 1871, Vol-II, 76-77* and Mclver, *Imperial Census of 1881: Madras, Vol. IV, Table VIII.B.*

⁹² Note the meaning of manual where it can be taken as an instructive or pedagogic tool. The gazetteers and manuals were compiled with the aim of providing authentic information about the region and its inhabitants, possibly vital in the case of exigencies.

The *Castes and Tribes* series by Thurston might have aimed to be a ‘complete’ set of accounts of the peoples of India, but it functions in the main as a glossary of names of groups including the castes and tribes. To clarify, if the same name or a similar name is found in multiple contexts, they are all found under the same heading, despite the differences of region, language, sect etc. In some cases, this results in some mixture of detail and confusion, further exacerbated by the practice of quoting at length from different sources, which usually aim to drive different points. Nevertheless, as a glossary of names, it also helps to expand the network of associations invoked by the recording of some detail, however minute it may be. The section on the Sthanikas quotes Sturrock verbatim except for a few parts where more up-to-date knowledge is offered. For instance, Thurston adds that the ‘Subramanya [*sic*]’ section claims superiority over the Kumbla sub-caste and that there are no marriage alliances between them.⁹³ While Sturrock had mentioned in passing that they had *gotras*⁹⁴ like the Brahmins, here the Subramanya section are said to belong to the “Rig Saka (Rig Veda)” and to gotras such as “Viswamitra, Angirasa and Baradwaja [*sic*]” in addition to twelve exogamous septs.⁹⁵ A few examples of these septs are given.⁹⁶ Sturrock had referred to Sthanikas as “Shanbogs and Mukhtesars [*sic*]”⁹⁷ but Thurston adds that “Moktessors [*sic*]” are chief men of a village or a

⁹³ Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India Vol. VI*, 403.

⁹⁴ These are markers of the patrilineal clan and play a role in regulating marriage. Marriages between couples who belong to the same *gotra* is usually forbidden, unless there is enough distance in terms of male relatives that prevents a union between close blood relatives. Thurston, *Castes and Tribes Vol. VI— P TO S*, 403-404.

⁹⁵ The term sept occurs very frequently in Thurston’s ethnographic surveys. They function like *gotras* in regulating marriage, and when both are mentioned, the sept may be a smaller division within the *gotra*. However, in the matrilineal castes of Tulunadu and Kerala, septs may also be matrilineal. In the case of the Bants (Bunts), Thurston says that “the Bants are divided into a number of balis (exogamous septs), which are traced in the female line, *i.e.*, a boy belongs to his mother’s, not to his father’s bali”. See Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India Vol. I— A TO B* (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 163-164.

⁹⁶ Of the eight names given, this author can recognize two as surnames that survive. Of these, Adhikari means an official, while two others, namely Pandita and Heggade also seem to indicate occupation or status, as a scholar and chief respectively. However, these names are not common and may not have even survived as septs.

⁹⁷ J. Sturrock, *District Manuals: South Canara*, 155.

caste, and are summoned when an inquest or search is to be performed. Some of the ‘Moktessors’ of a temple may be Sthanikas.⁹⁸ At caste meetings where social disputes are brought, the ‘Shanbhog’ i.e., writer or accountant would record the evidence and the Moktessor would provide his decree. The most significant addition in this account is the claim made by the Sthanikas on the “famous temple of Subramanya” which “is said to have been in charge of the Sthanikas, till it was wrested from them by the Shivalli Brahmans.”⁹⁹ Some privileges at the temple are said to have been accorded to the Sthanikas in the past. Presently, many were still attached to the temples, where among other duties, they placed “cooked food on the *bali pitam* (altar stone).”¹⁰⁰ This food is said to be eaten by Sthanikas and not by the Brahmans. Curiously, it is added that “in the Mysore province, a Brahman woman who partakes of this food loses her caste and becomes a prostitute.”¹⁰¹ In general, ethnography from Buchanan to Sturrock to Thurston, over a century, has progressively provided more information, as well as possibilities of connections to other groups and regions. The Sthanikas can be seen making more assertions on their status, and their rhetoric also seems to have been recorded in greater detail. These hint at some form of association or forum, or a few educated members who were able to articulate their case. However, ethnography was generally not conscious of the passage of time, and the people it studied were objects, removed from the same plane of time as the ethnographer. This undertone can be detected in the parts of the description of the Sthanikas which have seemingly been retained without comment.

Thurston also glosses a few of the other names we have come across. Golaka is said to mean a bastard and is clubbed with the “Moilis or temple servants in South Canara descended

⁹⁸ Thurston, *Castes and Tribes Vol. VI— P TO S*, 403.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 404.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

from dancing-girls” in the Madras census report for 1901.¹⁰² In adjoining Mysore, it is said to be a term “applied to the children of Brahmans by Malerus, or temple servants.” On the Moyilis, Buchanan’s account of the Moylar is repeated, including the association with the Sthanikas. In addition, it is said that Moyilis “are not the same as the Maleru (or Maleyavaru)”.¹⁰³ The latter are said to be dancing-girls and prostitutes while Moyili women are not. Finally, in customs the Moyilis resemble the Bants and have the same septs as the Bants and Billavas. Here at last is a major difference from the Sthanikas, i.e., they are a matrilineal caste. The section on the Devadigas is more detailed. While the usual details about diet, inheritance and conjugality are discussed, their traditional occupation is said to be in the temples, their name meaning “slaves or servants of the deva or god.”¹⁰⁴ The caste is said to be a mixed one since some of them “have the typical prominent cheek-bones and square face of the Jains.”¹⁰⁵ Their calling seems to have been ordained in the past when it was found that Brahmans could not perform all the services in the temples. Then, it was fixed that the Brahmans could only worship, while “the Stanikas and Devadigas should perform the other services.”¹⁰⁶ Looking up the Maleru, we find that it refers to women temple servants in some temples of the Malnad (the upper reaches of the Western Ghats, bordering Tulunadu). A woman who eats “the sacrificial rice strewn on the *balipitam* (sacrificial altar)” loses caste and becomes a “public woman, or Maleru.”¹⁰⁷ Her children by Brahmans are apparently called Golakas. Once again, the Sthanikas are mentioned here. In the Madras census of 1901, ‘Male’ or ‘Malera’ is apparently returned as a Sthanika sub-caste. However, they are said to not be equal to the latter. “They are attached to temples, and their ranks are swelled by

¹⁰² Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India Vol. II— C TO J* (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 284.

¹⁰³ Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India Vol. V— M TO P* (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 81.

¹⁰⁴ Thurston, *Castes and Tribes Vol. II*, 153-154.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁰⁷ Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India Vol. IV— K TO M* (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 439.

outcaste Brahman and Konkani women.”¹⁰⁸ In this way, the Sthanikas are associated in one way or the other with various other named groups. This could be based on supposed shared origins, common occupational traits, or even due to some social practices such as partaking of the rice on the stone altar. Nevertheless, the Sthanikas are repeatedly mentioned in the context of temple servants even though their similarity to the Brahmins was also being discovered and recorded.

Conclusion

By the end of the nineteenth century, the census and ethnographical projects had increasingly amassed more ‘knowledge’ about the castes of Tulunadu. The Sthanikas had been authoritatively glossed as temple servants and thus of low status in the colonial documents, which was repeated in different accounts. However, the census reports of 1871 and 1881 had recorded them as Brahmins and thus notionally equal to other Brahmin castes of the region. These are suggestive of the nature of the functioning of these projects. The compilers of ethnographies such as Sturrock and Thurston evidently favoured earlier ethnographical accounts and chose to reproduce them. It can be read as preferring to record difference, perhaps driven by notions about the extreme diversity of the castes and tribes of India and the intricate hierarchies embedded in them. The example of the Satanis in Madras might also suggest that the need to develop a general theory of caste influenced the classification of dissimilar groups under the same categories due to a few perceived similarities. The objectification of the Sthanikas in the nineteenth century would be met in the following decades by a repudiation, by both Sthanikas as well as others who investigated the history of the Sthanikas and attempted to present an

¹⁰⁸ Thurston, *Castes and Tribes Vol. IV*, 440.

alternative picture. At least one type of source from this century already provides a discordant note, namely the *kaifiyats*. They confirm the association of the Sthanikas with temples, those of Yellur and Dharmasthala, but also portray them as officials commanding some authority, as an officer of the treasury and lieutenant to the temple administrator.

The Twentieth Century: Sthanikas as Subjects

Introduction

In the nineteenth century, the records show the Sthanikas as objects of ethnography, in which they were defined consistently as a class of low servants in the temples of Tulunadu, often clubbed with the Moyilis or Devadigas. The first indication of any response by the Sthanikas to their caste description can be seen in notes of dissent recorded in Sturrock's Manual.¹ From the early twentieth century, there is definite record of the Sthanikas organizing themselves, in the form of a caste association and in establishing institutions such as temples. In 1908, the Sri Subrahmanya Sabha was established as a caste association for the Sthanikas.² In 1920, the hamlet of Pavanje near Mangalore saw the establishment of the Jnanashakti Subrahmanya temple by Vasu Bhattaru.³ There was also a movement to change the name of the caste entirely by claiming that they were Shiva Brahmins instead. Around the same time, a delegation of leaders of the caste and the association approached the *matha* and guru of Sringeri, the seat of Smarta orthodoxy, to be granted an edict which would declare them to be Brahmins and rightful disciples of the *matha*. The record of the first two decades of the twentieth century show considerable mobilization by the Sthanikas, which is missing from the archives of the previous century and from general histories of the Sthanikas. We also hear Sthanika voices unambiguously for the first time, not only indirectly through accounts of their activities, but also

¹ Sturrock, J. *Madras District Manuals: South Canara, Volume I* (Madras; Government Press, 1894), 154.

² See the biographical sketch of one of its founding fathers, Kadaba Kumbhat Krishnayya in Nooru Hejje Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje: Smarana Sanchike 2008 (Hundred Steps: A Commemorative Volume 2008)* (Mangalore: Sri Subrahmanya Sabha, 2008), 1.

³ PSV Sharma, NV Upadhyaya, and VR Udyavara. *Pavanje Sri Jnanashakti Subrahmanyakshetra* (Mangalore: Belle Bhavani Rao, 1982), 6.

directly from intellectuals such as NS Shiva Rao. He attempted the earliest known caste history, speculating that the Sthanikas were not only Brahmins, but that they had arrived in Tulunadu prior to the other Brahmin castes. His writings may have spurred historical investigation, and Rao also seems to have maintained contact with other scholars, making use of their histories and in turn influencing them. The picture of Sthanika society afforded to us in the early twentieth century is very different from what colonial ethnography would have us believe.

This response by the Sthanikas may be taken to represent one of the ways in which they reacted to modernity. The picture afforded to us is that of a state-led imposition of modernity in the nineteenth century, and a slow adoption by Indian society which becomes visible by the early twentieth century. The generation of Sthanikas that started the Sabha appear to have received some education and possessed some land, while the generations born later would boast several graduates and members of the educated professional class.⁴ This is already an indication that Sthanikas were not spared by the instruments of modernity and can be inferred indirectly. The preceding century had led to widespread changes in education, employment, and patterns of land ownership. Additionally, oral narratives and biographies talk about the roles that were held in colonial bureaucracy as village headmen and accountants, which allows us to trace this class in history. The evidence also points to differentiation within the caste, not only from the textually inscribed occupation of temple service, but also from older to newer vocations. A few also undertook religious training as priests and ritual specialists, and imparted education in Sanskrit and the scriptures. However, the association with temples remained important to the caste discourse and received invigoration from a new generation of historians. The mobility of the

⁴ The founder Kadaba Kumbhat Krishnayya was a *shanbhogue* (village accountant) while ND Krishna Rao born in 1904 qualified for the Indian Civil Service in 1929. See the biographical sketch "Justice Nandalike Deva Rao Krishna Rao" in Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*.

Sthanikas did not only have a secular aspect. There was also a phase of religious revival, demonstrated by the establishment of a temple of their own where they could congregate, and in establishing contact with the Sringeri *matha*. Curiously, the Sabha pre-dates both of these more traditional forms of association. The first generation of ‘native’ historians and scholars started writing about regional history, its pilgrimage centres, and its social composition in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁵ To a large extent, they were influenced by colonial knowledge production, in that they sought to imitate the structures of the gazetteers and tried to provide their own ethnographical accounts. While the Sthanikas are occasionally mentioned in these writings, BA Saletore went on to publish a long paper in 1938 on the identity and nature of temple officials.⁶ Relying on epigraphy, he clearly stated that the Sthanikas had been mischaracterized and suggested updating the gazetteers to reflect their proper social status in history. Writings by Sthanika authors in the 1940s, 50s and 60s, usually in a historical vein, draw heavily on the work of Saletore and acknowledge the debt. Now the Sthanikas were properly the subjects of historical curiosity and were no longer described in the repetitive manner of the colonial documents. The role of a class of temple officials called *sthanikas* was becoming increasingly clear as inscriptions from south India were deciphered and published. Perhaps owing to a gradual shift in their fortunes, the ‘ownership’ of temples by the Sthanikas was increasingly discussed, which joined hands with a narrative of sectarian conflict and forcible dispossession. By the 1960s, a younger generation of regional scholars and historians was active. Saletore had busied himself with the study of larger themes spanning Karnataka and India, while Tulunadu was now being

⁵ Polali Sheenappa Heggade, Keshava Krishna Kuduva, Ganapati Rao Aigal and BA Saletore were the stalwarts according to Pundikai Ganapayya Bhat. “Itihasa Rachaneyya Modala Hejjegalu” (The First Steps in Composing Our History), in *Poli – A Commemorative Volume for Canara 200* (Mangalore: Deputy Commissioner, Dakshina Kannada District, 2000), 52-62.

⁶ See BA Saletore, “The Sthanikas and their Historical Importance,” *Journal of the University of Bombay* Vol VII, Part I (1938): 29-93.

studied on its own terms. Among them, P Gururaja Bhat is one of the tallest figures, with his magnum opus on Tuluva history and culture still widely consulted. He studied the Sthanikas in a monograph on them.⁷ Bhat is remembered fondly to this day for rehabilitating the Sthanikas and is often the first reference whenever history is discussed by them.

Mobility and Mobilization

Before moving on, it is necessary to give a brief history of Tulunadu in the nineteenth century, which is relevant to understand the condition of the Sthanikas in the twentieth century and their caste discourse when it makes use of the past. A comprehensive history is not appropriate at this place, but an outline will help map some components of discourse and assist in historicizing it. As far as the Sthanikas are concerned, some of them credit colonialism and its change of administration, land and agricultural policies, and interference in the management of temples with their social degradation.⁸ Taken to its extreme, such discourse asserts a high status up to the advent of colonialism and modernity and presents the nineteenth century as the catalyst in their fortunes. At the same time, modernity is also hailed for enabling the Sthanikas to avail themselves of Western education which eventually led to them lifting themselves out of poverty and participating in the public sphere despite past discrimination.⁹ Regardless of this discourse, it is also necessary to place the social history of the Sthanikas in the larger history of the region. N Shyam Bhat has studied the effects of British land and revenue policy in this period.¹⁰ The

⁷ See *Tulunadina Itihasadalli Sthanikaru (Sthanikas in Tulunadu History)*, 2nd reprint (Mangalore: Shri Subrahmanya Sabha, 2008) (first impression 1966).

⁸ Karun Rao Belle (Secretary, Sri Subrahmanya Sabha), in discussion with the author, January 2023.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See Bhat, "Early Colonial Experience: 1792-1862", 52-62.

Sthanikas by virtue of holding land in a primarily agricultural economy, especially those donated to them for their service in the temples, would have been affected by these policies. Many families carry memories of having been *potails* and *shanbagues* i.e., village headmen and accountant under the colonial regime.¹¹ Buchanan has already mentioned how they were employed as account keepers, which must have referred to this profession. According to Bhat, the first collector of the district, Thomas Munro, left a deep impact by recommending the *ryotwari* system of land settlement as against the *zamindari* that had been implemented in Bengal. He apparently believed that private property manifested itself in Canara in its best state in the form of the prevalent *mulageni* or permanent tenancy, in which the rights of the lease holder could not be alienated from the land.¹² However, revenue was to be collected in cash and not in kind.¹³ The introduction of a money economy was a significant change that led to the emergence of a class of moneylenders who lent to peasants unable to cope with the rates.¹⁴ The revenue ‘settlement’ was made with anyone who owned the *mulawarga* title or proprietary right over the land irrespective of whether or not they actually took to cultivation.¹⁵ Thus, rich and poor alike, absentee landlords included got titles to the land. Munro left Canara in 1800, and his recommendations continued to be followed with minor changes. The high rates and demand for revenue payment in cash led to many peasants falling in arrears to the government in which case the lands were auctioned off publicly while moneylenders could also take possession of the lands

¹¹ Indeed, Shanbhogue or Shanbhag is a common surname among Sthanikas, especially from the southern parts of Tulunadu.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Bhat, “Early Colonial Experience: 1792-1862”, 53.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

if the loans could not be paid.¹⁶ Bhat concludes that these policies led to large scale transfer of property ownership in the early decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁷

The establishment of the first caste association of the Sthanikas seems to have been enabled by the presence of a small number of families that had land, had obtained education and were employed in the towns, many as doctors of Indian medicine. Apart from farmers and landowners, some of the traditional occupations of the Sthanikas can be inferred from studying their surnames. These include astrologers, teachers, village doctors and priests¹⁸ indicated by names like Joshi, Upadhyaya, Shastri, and Bhatta respectively. The Sri Subrahmanya Sabha was established in 1908, and was registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860 in 1942.¹⁹ It celebrated its centenary in 2008, and released a commemorative volume which contains invaluable material on its history as well as the community.²⁰ The records of the Sabha inform us of its office holders at its inception and subsequent sessions and name its board of directors when it adopted a new constitution after registration. Apart from a few well-known figures who are supplied with biographical sketches, it is difficult to infer their social status and occupations. However, the list of directors from 1942 notes occupations along with names and addresses. Among the seven directors are two landholders, an astrologer, a supervisor of co-operative societies, a medical officer at the municipal dispensary, a medical practitioner, and the head clerk to the district education officer.²¹ This list shows a mix of traditional rural occupations and urban

¹⁶ Ibid., 54.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Sthanikas seem to have officiated as priests for ceremonies held within the caste. Except for a few temples that were under hereditary Sthanika administration, they seem to have not become priests of temples. A few families claim to have held on to *vaidika* professions, as distinct from most of the community who had taken up secular or *loukika* roles.

¹⁹ Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 12.

²⁰ See Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 12.

²¹ Sri Subrahmanya Sabha, *Memorandum of Association* (Mangalore: Sri Subrahmanya Sabha, 1942), 3.

literate vocations, especially in government service. It accords with narratives of the recent past, which take pride in Sthanikas having adopted modern education and thus having outpaced rivals such as the Shivallis who had stuck more closely to their traditional religious roles.²² It is observed that the Sthanikas today are relatively prosperous compared to a significant section of the other Brahmin castes who still work as priests in temples, which provide little income.²³ The move towards secular education and employment is attributed to the dire poverty of the community.²⁴ Another account deems that employment in the colonial bureaucracy was more attractive due to the prestige it commanded.²⁵ However, other historical factors might have played a role. In the recent past, the Sthanikas already seem to have embraced secular roles since the traditional roles in the temples invited prejudice. They had access to education and had instead sought employment in literate professions, most notably as village accountants. It is thus likely that they easily took up employment when more opportunities for the educated opened. This social capital might have also allowed them to pursue higher education and qualify for better paying jobs, thus leading to a gradual upliftment of the community. For example, many Sthanika families had traditionally produced village doctors. They might have been able to easily become licensed medical practitioners by training for some of the new medical degrees that had been introduced.²⁶

²² Y Sudarshan Rao (Author, *Asmite*), in discussion with the author, October 2022.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ NK Jagannivasa Rao (Former Secretary, Sri Subrahmanya Sabha), in discussion with the author, February 2023.

²⁵ Karun Rao Belle (Secretary, Sri Subrahmanya Sabha), in discussion with the author, January 2023.

²⁶ For instance, one of the founders of the Sabha was MV Shastri, who had pursued education in Sanskrit and Ayurveda. His son, Dr. MC Shastri continued the medical tradition by qualifying for the L.I.M (Licentiate in Indian Medicine) degree. See the biographical sketches "Ayurveda Bhushana MV Shastri" and "Dr. MC Shastri" in Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 41-42.

Subrahmanya Sabha and Shiva Brahmin

On December 26 and 27, 1909, the Sabha held its first general body meeting in the house of Nattoji Vishnu Rao in Puttur with monetary contributions from 63 members. In the report from that meeting, the organization counted 124 members in all.²⁷ This was subsequent to two meetings held in 1908 by a few leaders of the caste, who had resolved to setup a permanent association. They had assembled on July 12, 1908, to debate a ‘matter of religion’.²⁸ In the discussions, they agreed to start an organization that would encourage education, bring uniformity in the observances of the community, decide on internal caste matters and contribute to the general upliftment of the caste.²⁹ It was resolved to assemble again after inviting representatives from all over the district. On December 30 and 31, they met to establish the Sabha under the presidency of Kumbhat Krishnayya and elected its managing committee.³⁰ Regional representatives were nominated to propagate news of the organization, all along the length of South Canara and even in Sringeri above the Western Ghats, and Madikeri in Coorg.³¹ The records of the early years are lost, but these details had been assembled by the organizers of the golden jubilee in 1959 by reaching out to elders within the caste and by requesting them to hand over any scraps of paper that might be relevant.³² However, a short biography of Krishnayya provides a few interesting details. He had been born in 1859 to Kumbhat Sankayya and Lakshmi in the village of Kadaba near Kukke Subrahmanya, the principal seat of serpent-

²⁷ Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

³² *Ibid.*, 8.

worship in the district, on which the Sthanikas lay a claim.³³ The Kumbhat family claims to have had a history of at least 500 years as ‘prime ministers’ and *shanbhogues* to the local Kadamba chiefs.³⁴ Sankayya was the *magane shanbhogue* of Subrahmanya Kasba, and the family seems to have controlled four temples around Kadaba, where Sthanikas themselves served as priests.³⁵ Krishnayya had to carry the burden of looking after the family affairs soon after he turned 17, and also trained to become a *shanbhogue* himself. He is credited with the eventual establishment of the Sabha by undertaking decades of preparatory work, in bringing together elders and enthusiasts of the caste. Starting from his base near Subrahmanya, he traveled as far as Udupi and Madikeri in either direction by foot, when travel and communication facilities were poor. By 1909, he had prepared a detailed caste census of over 600 families, recording their names, *gotra*, age, occupation, and details of property.³⁶ Select portions of this census have been published by the Sabha.³⁷ The association that would go on to become the Sabha had humbler origins in Kadaba, before shifting base to the bigger towns of Puttur and Mangalore. He was assisted by Shara Appaji Rao, Nandalike Deva Rao and Nattoji Krishnayya in its fledgling days.³⁸ Despite periods of lull due to the indifference of the community, the Sabha resolved to encourage *vaidika* i.e., religious education as well as institute scholarships for students of English.³⁹ By 1916, it had disbursed a few prizes to students of good standing in religious training and scholarships to poor students. From 1944, Kudpi Bhujanga Rao, a successful industrialist in Bombay, instituted a permanent trust of Rs. 20,000 to endow the Sabha with an annual sum of Rs. 600 for disbursing

³³ K Gopal Rao, *Kadaba Kumbhat Krishnayya* (Kadaba: Navarasa Sahitya Male, 2012), 6.

³⁴ Rao, *Kumbhat Krishnayya*, 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁷ Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 2-4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 9.

its scholarships.⁴⁰ He went on to increase this sum gradually and sponsored the construction of a student hostel for Sthanikas in Mangalore.

A chapter that has not been captured in the pages of the Sabha's commemorative volume was a movement towards asserting a new name for the caste as 'Shiva Brahmins'. There is little evidence of a sustained campaign, but there are some memories and visible reminders of this effort.⁴¹ The memorandum of association drafted in 1942 defines membership as eligible for any adult person belonging to the "Shiva Brahmana [*sic*] Community".⁴² The caste associations in Puttur and Kasargod still retain the name.⁴³ Krishnayya's biographer prefers to use it over the name Sthanika. The decision to change the name was taken due to the stigma that had come to be attached to the name Sthanika.⁴⁴ Sturrock had already noted it in 1894, writing that they "claim to be Siva Brahmins [*sic*]"⁴⁵ This perhaps indicates petitioning, and perhaps Krishnayya was involved in it. Thurston also mentions this fact, noting that "at times of census, Sivadvija [*sic*] and Siva Brahman have been given as synonyms of Stanika".⁴⁶ The usage of this name may have made it easy to return themselves plainly as Brahmins as well, by claiming that they were actually a sub-caste. The census report of 1891 for Madras names the Sthanikas among a group of temple servant castes, numbering 4650. Sturrock's account seems to be based on the explanatory note given here, but there is no mention of the new name.⁴⁷ The name 'Sivadvija'

⁴⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁴¹ Conversations with a few leaders of the caste provided me much knowledge on this.

⁴² Sri Subrahmanya Sabha, *Memorandum of Association*, 4.

⁴³ These are respectively the Shivabrahmana Samaja Seva Sangha (R.), and Shivabrahmana Sabha (R.) respectively, as of 2008. See the report on the centenary celebrations in *Nooru Hejje*.

⁴⁴ Karun Rao Belle (Secretary, Sri Subrahmanya Sabha), in discussion with the author, January 2023.

⁴⁵ Sturrock, *District Manuals: South Canara*, 154.

⁴⁶ Thurston, *Castes and Tribes Vol. VI— P TO S*, 404.

⁴⁷ HA Stuart, *Census of India, 1891, Volume XIII: Madras, The Report on the Census* (Madras: Government Press, 1893), 271.

appears in the caste index with ‘Siva Brahma[n]’ and ‘Sivanambi’ as sub-castes.⁴⁸ However, these don’t appear to be particular to South Canara. The census of 1901 seems to have done away with the granular listing of population by caste, and just list the Brahmans as a whole. The Sthanikas number 1469 in all.⁴⁹ From this, Thurston deduces that “they have apparently returned themselves as Brahmans in considerable numbers”⁵⁰ despite the provision of the synonyms. In 1911 as well, the granular caste tables are eschewed, and the Sthanikas number only 255, very likely due to the trend to return themselves as Brahmins.⁵¹ These details agree with present-day memories of this phase. The adoption of the name seems to have been popular in the southern and interior parts of the district, especially Puttur.⁵² The Sthanikas of this region also seem to have been wealthier, with larger landholdings than the densely populated coastal belt.⁵³ Many leaders of the caste association also came from this relatively better-off section. They preferred to call themselves Shiva Brahmins, and thus might have returned themselves as Brahmins to the census. In literature produced by the caste in the twentieth century, this name is largely missing, or is not used on its own. The writers prefer to use the name Sthanika, perhaps because its

⁴⁸ See HA Stuart, *Census of India, 1891, Volume XV: Madras, Tables A to E, British Territory, Tables for Feudatory States and A Caste Index* (Madras: Government Press, 1893), 92. They numbered 7476. The names suggest their origin in the Tamil speaking regions. Tambalas also appear in this census. There is a further note on them, which calls them “a class of beggars who worship Siva and beat drums”. Apparently, Shankaracharya had appointed Tamil Brahmans to perform temple service during his travels to the north. The Telugu speakers or Andhras among whom they lived thus called them ‘Tambala’. Further it is noted, “they are not now, however, regarded as Brahmans, whatever their original position may have been.” See Stuart, *Census of India, 1891, Volume XIII*, 268.

⁴⁹ W Francis, *Census of India, 1901 Vol. XV-A: Madras Part II* (Madras: Government Press, 1902), 181.

⁵⁰ Thurston, *Castes and Tribes Vol. VI— P TO S*, 404.

⁵¹ Charles J Molony, *Census of India, 1911. Volume XII: Madras. Part II. Imperial And Provincial Tables* (Madras: Government Press, 1912), 114.

⁵² Karun Rao Belle (Secretary, Sri Subrahmanya Sabha), in discussion with the author, January 2023.

⁵³ Within the community, a distinction is made between the *mudai* and *paddai*, or easterners and westerners respectively. The westerners are thought to be more refined, but the easterners think that they are stingy hosts.

prestige had been raised by then due to historical research. The decree that caste leaders obtained from Sringeri in 1924 declaring them Brahmins lists this name among others.⁵⁴

The Religious Community

Parallel to the establishment and growth of the modern and ‘secular’ Sabha, the Sthanikas also turned towards the religious institutions of the temple and *matha*. The Jnanashakti Subrahmanya temple in Pavanje originated in the desire of Kodimane Vasu Bhattaru to establish a temple run by the Sthanikas where they would not be discriminated against.⁵⁵ As with Krishnayya, tradition attributes a long history to the family, which claims to have established the ancient temple of Mahalingeshwara on the hillock in Pavanje.⁵⁶ In the recent past, the male members of the family had been serving the temple as *parupatyagara*, translated as supervisor.⁵⁷ Ramappayya was serving in this capacity, when on the occasion of the annual festival, he felt insulted by the Shivalli Brahmin priests of the temple. After all the other temple servants had been given the *prasada*, the priest supposedly called for the ‘sanika’⁵⁸ to appear and threw it into his cupped palms from far away. Smarting from the humiliation, he vowed to never step foot inside the temple, and started collecting funds for the construction of a temple that would be exclusively managed by the Sthanikas. This mission was completed by his son Vasu Bhattaru,

⁵⁴ They are called Subrahmanya, Sthanika, Shivabrahmana, Koppala, Shivadvija and Patali. Among these, Koppala is unknown. See D.K. Brahmana Yuvaka Sangha. *Prathama Varushada Varadi (1938-39) mattu Shivabrahmanara Sankshipta Charitre (Report of the First Year (1938-39) and a Concise History of Shiva Brahmins)* (Mangalore: Mangalore Press, 1939), 1.

⁵⁵ Yaji Diwakar Bhat (Tantri, Pavanje Jnanashakti Subrahmanya Temple), in discussion with the author, April 2023.

⁵⁶ Sharma, Upadhyaya, and Udyavara, *Pavanje Sri Jnanashakti Subrahmanyakshetra*, 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3

⁵⁸ A diminutive form of Sthanika, which renders it meaningless. Yaji Diwakar Bhat (Tantri, Pavanje Jnanashakti Subrahmanya Temple), in discussion with the author, April 2023.

beginning construction in 1916 and being consecrated in 1920.⁵⁹ The complicated rituals that needed to be performed required the guidance of ritual specialists known as *tantris*. As the ritual status of the Sthanikas should make clear, they could not aspire to higher religious training in their own right and mostly needed to employ Shivallis to perform the rituals. However, a few families do seem to have produced priests, who had also started to impart this to young Sthanika boys as they would find it hard to receive instruction elsewhere.⁶⁰ Kuraya Narayana Acharya had received training in the *agama shastras*, which would allow him to lead the consecration of the deity and institute daily worship to it.⁶¹ The temple was encouraged by the Sabha, which began to also hold its annual meetings in its premises.⁶² A *pathashala*, or school that imparted traditional education in Sanskrit and priestly duties, was also opened.⁶³ Sthanikas began to congregate to the temple to perform important life cycle rituals such as the sacred thread ceremony and weddings.⁶⁴ Today, the temple of Pavanje is the focal point for a small community of *vaidika* Sthanika families, who fulfill all the roles at the temple, from the *tantri* to the ordinary priests.⁶⁵

The *matha* or monastery and its *swami* as the spiritual head of the community, are commonly found in Karnataka. It is of specific importance to the Brahmins since membership or discipleship of the *matha* confirms the sect to which they belong, and the teachings that they are supposed to follow. Thus, *mathas* can be distinguished as Smarta or Madhva among the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁰ Sturrock had noted that some educated men had become priests.

⁶¹ See the biographical sketch “Ve. Sri. Kuraya Narayacharyaru” in Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 37-38.

⁶² Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 10-11.

⁶³ Sharma, Upadhyaya, and Udyavara, *Pavanje Sri Jnanashakti Subrahmanyakshetra*, 8.

⁶⁴ In the family of this author itself, there are several connections to Pavanje. My grandfather K Vasudeva Sharma had been sent as a young boy to train as a priest in the *pathashala* that had been recently opened. The thread ceremony of my father, the weddings of my parents and that of my aunt were all conducted at the same temple.

⁶⁵ Yaji Diwakar Bhat (Tantri, Pavanje Jnanashakti Subrahmanya Temple), in discussion with the author, April 2023.

Brahminical castes. The Brahmins of the region are marked by their affiliation to these institutions, and such details were recorded minutely by the ethnographers starting with Buchanan. The Shivalli Brahmins follow one of eight *mathas* descended from eight disciples of Madhvacharya. There are also Madhva Brahmins who follow other *mathas*, supposedly established by Madhvacharya or his disciples. The greater the antiquity, the greater is its prestige. Accordingly, the Sringeri guru is considered the highest seat of authority for the Smartas in south India, as the institution is said to have been established by the respected ascetic and exponent of *advaita* philosophy, Shankaracharya in the 8th century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Sthanikas found themselves without a *matha* of their own, which was one of the markers of Brahmin status. In addition, the *matha* had the powers to excommunicate, and conversely rehabilitate members of the sect. The efforts started in 1914 through appeals by letter to the *matha*, and the decree was eventually granted in 1924.⁶⁶ In 1921, some leaders of the caste submitted a petition to the guru. A delegation seems to have been sent, headed by Bhaskar Shastri, to inquire into the conditions of the Sthanikas and their ritual observances. After it submitted its report, in 1924, the Agent of the *matha*⁶⁷, Srikantha Shastri summoned the caste leaders MV Shastri, Dr B Vasudeva Rao, Kudpi Anand Rao, Dr Gopalakrishna Rao, and NS Shiva Rao. He informed them that they would be given a decree admitting that the Sthanikas are indeed Dravida Brahmins, are *shatkarmis* i.e., follow the six rites enjoined for Brahmins⁶⁸, and

⁶⁶ These details are taken from the presidential speech of the golden jubilee of the Subrahmanya Sabha on December 31, 1959, delivered by Dr B Vasudeva Rao, retd. Assistant Surgeon. See "Adhyaksha Bhashana" in Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 17-19.

⁶⁷ The term 'agent' does not capture the importance of the office as much as the Kannada title *sarvadhikari*.

⁶⁸ While the Sthanikas' claims to be Brahmins were not accepted by the other Brahmin castes, the latter would also sometimes claim that the Sthanikas were only *trikarmi* Brahmins i.e., they followed three rites of the Brahmins but not all the six rites, and thus were a lower class within the Brahmins. This accords well with Buchanan's description where the Sthanikas could not read the scriptures, but there was no ban on receiving it. Karun Rao Belle (Secretary, Sri Subrahmanya Sabha), in discussion with the author, January 2023

that they could dine with Brahmins who could also accept food from the Sthanikas. The guru handed the decree on Makara Sankranthi day of that year. He is said to have advised them that it was no use to keep the decree safe in a chest, but that the Sthanikas had to uplift themselves through education.⁶⁹ The immediate implication of the declaration was of course, to finally grant the status of Brahmins to the Sthanikas, though it would not be always respected. However, the bigger import of this campaign was to mark the Sthanikas as part of a larger religious community, which carried great prestige. Even if the Sthanikas had claimed to be Smarta Brahmins, now there were definite links that they could establish with other Smarta Brahmins and with the teachers and followers of *advaita* philosophy. The importance of the gurus, both Shankaracharya and the pontiff of Sringeri can be seen in the close contacts that the caste and its associations try to maintain and in their presence as symbols. The annual life of the various associations of the Sthanikas today includes the celebration of ‘Shankara Jayanti’ and meeting the guru to receive his blessings. All religious rituals include an invocation to the two gurus. The guru’s blessings are sought before embarking on any major activity by the associations such as the establishment of temples. The guru’s presence is also sought on these occasions and others, such as the centenary celebration of the Subrahmanya Sabha in 2008.⁷⁰

Caste Histories

In the twentieth century, the Sthanikas turned the gaze on themselves, to interrogate their history. No doubt, it was driven by a desire to refute the understanding of their social position by

⁶⁹ Vasudeva Rao made this remark in reference to the encouragement that the Sabha had given to students, especially English education, that had apparently been demanded. “Adhyaksha Bhashana” in Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 18.

⁷⁰ See the report of the centenary celebrations in *Nooru Hejje*.

the wider community, and as it had been recorded authoritatively in the colonial documents. These include those written by amateurs with scholarly interests such as NS Shiva Rao, by leaders of the caste who also agitated in various forums such as MS Achyuta Sharma, and the staid reflections of an inquisitive mind such as VR Udyavara. We shall investigate the latter in the next chapter, in discussing the Sthanika discourses on caste. NS Shiva Rao belonged to the large Nattoji family among the Sthanikas which had several branches, settled in different villages. He had studied up to the then intermediate level, and was fairly proficient in Kannada, Sanskrit and English.⁷¹ Rao was active in the affairs of the caste, especially in the Subrahmanya Sabha, and in the efforts to procure the proclamation from Sringeri.⁷² From the record, he seems to have been a prolific essayist, combining histories, mythology, and etymology to uncover the ‘true’ origins and nature of the Sthanikas. We have available a short essay called *Sthanika Prajnana* in Kannada which must have been composed in the early 1920s, for it was appreciated by the elder leader MV Shastri with a silver medal in 1926.⁷³ It is apparent that this paper enjoyed some circulation since BA Saletore notes it in his later monograph.⁷⁴ As a researcher, he seems to have amassed much material, especially those that could help explain the position of the Sthanikas. His ‘Sharada’ library is appreciated by Achyuta Sharma for providing the sources upon which he composed his polemical tracts. In fact, he dedicates one of the books in Rao’s memory. There is another place where Rao appears as an informant to general histories of Tulunadu. Polali Sheenappa Heggade is considered the first native historian of the district. Rao is credited for providing much of the information in the historical section of Heggade’s *Pulinapura*

⁷¹ See the biographical sketch “Nattoji Shara Shiva Rao, Puttur” in Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 5.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ See footnote 1 in BA Saletore, “The Sthanikas and their Historical Importance.” *Journal of the University of Bombay* Vol VII, Part I (1938), 29. He commends Rao’s attempts to derive the meanings of the root *sthana*, as showing “signs of much industry” but opines that the section on history “is devoid of any historical value”.

Mahatme (The Glory of Pulinapura), a book about the Polali Rajarajeshwari Temple, where he provides the Nattoji family history and its connections to that temple.⁷⁵ We have another essay from Rao, published as a pamphlet in 1944, *Sthanikas of Kanara District* where he attempts to provide a history of the Sthanikas from the earliest to the present and to describe their present condition.⁷⁶ Rao's influence can also be discerned in the later works of Heggade, especially *Prachina Tulunadu (Ancient Tulunadu)*.⁷⁷

The essay *Sthanika Prajnana* is preceded by another essay simply titled *Gokarna*.⁷⁸ The aim of this is to establish the history of human migrations and settlements in the west coast of India, which he calls 'Gokarna Mandala' and which Parashurama is supposed to have reclaimed from the sea.⁷⁹ According to Rao, the region was inhabited by the Dravidians up to 3100 BCE and saw the influx of Aryans and Scythians up to 1500 BCE.⁸⁰ Gokarna was apparently the southern-most province of the Aryans. There must have been an influx of people who also came through the sea route and the region is said to have had trans-oceanic contact with the Pheonicians, officers of King Solomon, and the ports of the Red Sea. Ashoka is said to have sent his officials to Kerala, by which time the west coast saw the influx of Jains. In 77-78 CE, a Jayapandya was ruling the region from Barkur. It then mentions the Ramayana, and how the ashrams of the *rishis* show the presence of the Brahmins in south India and in Gokarna Mandala.⁸¹ The sage Agastya settled the Aryans here before 1800 BCE. These people followed

⁷⁵ See Polali Sheenappa Heggade, "Pulinapura Mahatme" in *Sheenappa Hegde Samagra Sahitya* (Mangalore: Polali Sheenappa Hegde Janma Shatabdi Samiti Bantwal, 1991), 263-269.

⁷⁶ Here, Rao makes extensive references to the recent monograph by BA Saletore. See

⁷⁷ Rao and Heggade must have been in regular correspondence since the copy of *Prachina Tulunadu* in the Sharada library in the Nattoji family home is a present from Heggade to Rao.

⁷⁸ These two essays were also published as part of a booklet in 1939. See D.K. Brahmana Yuvaka Sangha, *Prathama Varushada Varadi (1938-39) mattu Shivabrahmanara Sankshipta Charitre*, 24-31.

⁷⁹ See "Gokarna Prabandha" in Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 5-6.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

the tenets of *varnashrama* and employed Brahmins as *purohits*. It is claimed that king Mayuravarma brought the Brahmins from ‘Ahicchatra’ around 200 CE, and whose migrations continued till 700-800 CE.⁸² In summary, Rao seems to be making the point that there existed Brahmins in Tulunadu before they were brought in by Mayuravarma. In the next essay *Sthanika Prajnana*, he starts with analyzing the words *sthana* and *sthanika* and provides a list of meanings as found in a few dictionaries. Among the meanings for *sthanika* are supervisor, officer, priest, *sthanacharya*⁸³, the Brahmin well-versed in scripture who oversees temple rituals, and a high official.⁸⁴ He then lists the occurrence of the word *sthanika* in five inscriptions of the Vijayanagar era, and in a medieval Kannada poetic text. He further lists other texts including the recently published *Arthashastra*, quoting the verse that mention *sthanika* as an officer of some kind. He concludes that having referred to law books, dictionaries, poetry, inscriptions, the *Arthashastra*, and the usage in the countries of Kerala, Andhra, ‘Dravida’⁸⁵, Kannada and Maharashtra, the term *sthanika* never symbolized a caste.⁸⁶ He then wonders why Sthanikas are a caste only in South Canara. He refers to the *Gokarna* essay and infers that before Mayuravarma’s Brahmins, there must have been Brahmins at least by the time of Ashoka, and that these must have been the Sthanikas.⁸⁷ He then makes the claim that these Brahmins have been performing the rituals at Subrahmanya and other places since time immemorial. Over time, they are supposed to have left *vaidika* learning and taken to material interests, and thus they came to be

⁸² This references the legends about Brahmin migration and settlement in Tulunadu as found in texts such as the *Sahyadri Khanda* and *Gramapaddhati*. After Parashurama created the region, it is only the king Mayuravarma who is supposed to have brought in Brahmins from a place called Ahicchatra. This place has not been identified consistently. See Rao, “Introduction” in *Brahmanas of South India*, 11-19. NS Shiva Rao connects it to the region of Nagamangala near Bangalore on etymological grounds.

⁸³ Meaning here an abbot or guru of a place.

⁸⁴ “Sthanika Prabandha”, Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 6.

⁸⁵ Referring to the Tamil speaking region. Ibid, 7.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

referred to as simply Sthanikas. He simply concludes that as they must have been wholly absorbed in the work of society, they disregarded their own interests, which has led to their ‘wretched situation’.⁸⁸ As far as is known, this is the first articulation by a Sthanika writer of their caste history. In rather condensed form, Rao makes simple claims on the origins of the Sthanikas, through reference to many kinds of material, possibly history books of different kinds, legends, the Hindu epics, and extrapolates from them to determine the antiquity of Brahmins in the region. He then tries to understand the meaning of the caste name and again takes recourse to dictionaries, inscriptions and other supposedly ancient texts. Though he does not explicitly make a claim on the exact role that the Sthanikas played in the past, he seems happy to conclude that they are indeed Brahmins, and of greater antiquity in the land than those supposedly brought by Mayuravarma. This claim to be the oldest Brahmin group, would be expanded upon by P Gururaja Bhat and by later Sthanika writers to claim to be the ‘original’ Brahmins of the land. In this short essay, Rao lays the foundation for both historical speculation and caste polemics to come.

Objects of Historiography

BA Saletore was the first trained historian to turn his attention to the Sthanikas.⁸⁹ He was aware of NS Shiva Rao’s attempt at a caste history, though he did not think that it had many merits. It is possible that the paper by Rao piqued Saletore to interrogate the history of the Sthanikas. He hailed from a village near Mangalore, and was no doubt acquainted with the

⁸⁸ He uses the phrase ‘shochaneeya sthiti’. Ibid.

⁸⁹ He graduated from St. Aloysius College, Mangalore, obtained an MA from St. Xavier’s College, Bombay for his thesis “Early History of Tuluvas” and PhD from London University for the thesis “Social and Political Life in the Vijayanagara Empire”. See KG Vasantha Madhava, “Dr. Bhaskarananda Saletore”, Tuluva Vol. 9, No. 2 (2019), 35-43.

Sthanikas as a caste living in Tulunadu. He was inclined to do an epigraphical study of the Sthanikas, or more properly, the “office of Sthanika”, and any connection to discussing a specific caste is made clear only in the final lengthy footnote, though there are a few hints.⁹⁰ This is important, since he chose to study the persons designated by various names, but often called *sthanika* in stone and copper plate inscriptions. Epigraphy had then emerged as the major primary sources to be studied to understand the ancient and medieval eras of the past. The Archaeological Survey of India had set up its own epigraphy department, as had the princely state of Mysore, who made inscriptions and their texts available in such publications as the *Indian Antiquary* journal, and the *Epigraphia Indica*, *Epigraphia Carnatica*, and *South Indian Inscriptions* series. The occurrence of the *sthanikas* in the texts must have been noticed. Saletore studies over 90 separate inscriptions and some literature, spanning over ten centuries, from the 9th to the 18th centuries. It is indeed a magisterial survey and succeeds in bringing out a range of associations of the *sthanikas* mentioned in the inscriptions with different religious, sectarian, political and agricultural conditions across the Kannada, Tamil and Telugu speaking countries. A description of his work performance will need to discuss his method, and thus also a critique of it. He starts, perhaps inspired by Rao’s reference to the *Arthashastra*, by looking at the occurrence of the work *sthanika* as the name of an officer of the state, who along with the *gopa*, was responsible for the collection of revenue in a district. He sees Kautilya’s precepts as laying down the functioning of the “Hindu State [*sic*]”, a category used for analyzing the entire timespan and geographical breadth. However, he also admits that both “the Hindu State and society had considerably altered since the days of Kautilya”.⁹¹ He notes that Kautilya does not specify that

⁹⁰ BA Saletore. “The Sthanikas and their Historical Importance.” *Journal of the University of Bombay* Vol VII, Part I (1938), 29.

⁹¹ Saletore, “The Sthanikas and their Historical Importance”, 33.

the *sthanika* belonged to any community, they were officials “recruited evidently from the highest classes of society”.⁹² He opines that it was only recently that they had become a caste, “more so by the machinations of those who were divided from the Sthanikas by religious tenets”.⁹³ That he intends to compare communities in the present with those mentioned centuries ago is evident when he takes up the Goravas and Tammadis to clarify that they were not the same as the Sthanikas and that their duties had differed.⁹⁴ He also makes clear that “there were other temple servants called variously Siva Brahmans, Jiyas, or Jiyangulu, Pujaris, Nambis, and quite a number of others. The Sthanikas [*sic*] cannot be classed with any of these servants of an inferior position.”⁹⁵ These conclusions are drawn from inscriptions which either fail to mention the *sthanikas* along with the temple servants or make clear that the two denote separate people. Interestingly, the epigraphs also refer to ‘Siva Brahmans’ whom he explicitly mentions as different from the *sthanikas*, perhaps acknowledging the Sthanika effort to change their caste name. The main difference for Saletore, is that these classes of people can be seen receiving gifts for their duties, while the *sthanikas* received gifts such as land, managing them as custodians but could also make endowments of their own. He also notes that the term ‘Arcaka’ was different, and that people “never confounded a Sthanika who was essentially a high official, with an Arcaka, who was merely an ordinary priest”.⁹⁶ Saletore gives a list of terms which he deems

⁹² Saletore, “The Sthanikas and their Historical Importance”, 33.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ These are names for castes or groups of temple servants in upland Karnataka i.e., the former Mysore state. Tammadis are found in the *Mysore Tribes and Castes* series. The entry for ‘Thammadi’ reads that they “are, by profession, worshippers of Iswara in Siva and other temples. They are employed for supplying flowers, in certain temples where Brahmans are pujaris.” From HV Nanjundayya and LK Ananthakrishna Iyer, *The Mysore Tribes and Castes: Volume IV* (Mysore: The Mysore University, 1931), 605. The Goravas do not appear in the list of castes. These groups must have been invoked for their perceived similarity to the Sthanikas in terms of duties assigned to them.

⁹⁵ Some of these names appear in different regions of south India, as shown in the examples quoted by Saletore. Ibid., 37.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 40.

equivalent to *sthanika*, namely *sthanacharya*, *sthanapati*, *sthanattar*, *tanattar*, *sthanadhipati*, and *samsthanukulu*.⁹⁷ He notes that these offices were common among the “Jainas, the Srivaisnavites [sic], the Kalamukhas, and the Saivites.”⁹⁸ There are other many details in this 70 page paper, but he concludes that the *sthanikas* “have always been important as rulers of a *sthana* (i.e., the office in a temple) and as trustees of the properties of the deities in temples”.⁹⁹ Furthermore, “in no period of Indian history were the Sthanikas ever identified with any of the menial temple servants”.¹⁰⁰

For our purpose, the lengthy footnote is equally as interesting, since Saletore speaks here specifically about the Sthanikas of South Canara.¹⁰¹ He confounds the objects of his study, the *sthanikas* as found in temple inscriptions, with the caste carrying the same name. Perhaps this is due to the association of the latter with the temples. He must have felt that in terms of history, studying the former could provide clues about the latter. Saletore is quite assertive that the description of the Sthanikas in the gazetteers may be “summarily dismissed as unhistorical”.¹⁰² He deems the statements “a libel on a body of officials that has had a brilliant record of public service behind it”.¹⁰³ In the paper he notices not more than five inscriptions from Tulunadu and analyzes them in much the same way as those found in the rest of south India, without drawing any connections to the present-day caste of Sthanikas. In the note however, he provides a number of observations and reports hearsay, from “personal investigations in Tuluva conducted in the

⁹⁷ Again, these terms are collated from different linguistic regions. Thus, *sthanattar* and *tanattar* are from the Tamil country, while *samsthanakulu* is from the Telugu country. The other terms seem to have been used across the Kannada, Tamil, and Telugu regions. Ibid., 41.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 90.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ This footnote is two and a half pages long. See note 198 in Ibid., 91-93.

¹⁰² Ibid., 91.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Udipi [*sic*] taluka between the years 1922 and 1925”.¹⁰⁴ He claims that the details “indicate a vast priority of the claims of the Sthanikas over those of the Vaisnavites [*sic*], in the matter of the control over temples.”¹⁰⁵ He gives a few examples where he says that images of earlier deities, notably of Shiva, had been thrown away and had been replaced by others. He also lists a few temples, which in his opinion, had passed from the Sthanikas to the ‘Vaisnavites’ including the “famous temple of Subrahmanya”.¹⁰⁶ Saletore states that tensions between the two groups came to a head “according to tradition that is available at Udipi”, in the time of the Madhva guru Vadiraja, dated to 1614.¹⁰⁷ It is said to have been over the construction of the famous Krishna *matha* and its tank, whose land belonged to the Sthanikas. In the quarrel, the numerically superior Madhvas won. He concludes that “if this tradition of the great quarrel ... is substantiated by other evidence”, the downfall of the Sthanikas in Tuluva could be dated to the first quarter of the seventeenth century AD”.¹⁰⁸

The career of P Gururaja Bhat exemplified his dedication to regional history.¹⁰⁹ Among his works are the general history *Tulunadu*, and his magnum opus *Studies in Tuluva History and Culture*. The latter is a mammoth volume, primarily because of the hundreds of photos published as photographic plates. These relate mostly to the art, architecture, and iconography of the temples of South Canara. Apart from giving a political history, he focused on temple administration, culture, the religious sects of the region and their distinctive practices. He is

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 92.

¹⁰⁵ These provide some clue as to the public sphere at the time, where the claims of the Sthanikas must have been heard and engaged with. Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 93.

¹⁰⁷ He might have been informed of this by Sthanikas in Udupi, though it is not clear. Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Hailing from a village near Udupi, he would go on to become lecturer at MGM College there. He obtained his PhD from the University of Mysore for the thesis “Studies in Tuluva History and Culture”. He went on to become the Principal of Milagres College, Kallianpur.

particularly admired by the Sthanikas for writing about them in particular, and in rehabilitating them by demonstrating a long history.¹¹⁰ He published a small monograph *Tulunadina Itihasadalli Sthanikaru (Sthanikas in Tulunadu History)*, where he also took the opportunity to investigate the other classes who were involved in temple service.¹¹¹ He included a study of a few temples that are today controlled by the Sthanikas, and which show traces of considerable antiquity and artistic merit. Like Saletore, and NS Shiva Rao before him, he shows interest in the terms *sthanika* and *sthana*. Starting as they do from Sanskrit etymology, he elaborates on the meaning whereby it means an officer in charge of a *sthana*.¹¹² From the dictionaries, he shows that the term *sthana* only denotes a political unit. He also examines a few inscriptions of Tulunadu to derive the sense in which this term could be used, which confirm the same meaning. However, Bhat states that in common parlance in south India and in its religious history, the term denotes a temple, a religious site, or a *matha*.¹¹³ Even if the writers of glossaries do not give this meaning, it is confirmed by usage in inscriptions in the Kannada, Tamil and Telugu countries. Citing a few examples, he also finds one inscription from the region where this sense is implied. Based on this, he infers that a *sthanika* is the official or lord of the *sthana*, and thus, the official of the temple. He asserts that in this sense, *sthanika* and other similar usages mean the same, namely *sthanapati*, *sthanadhyaksha*, *sthanacharya*, and *sthana karta*.¹¹⁴ For each of these terms, Bhat cites examples from the inscriptions of the region, and surmises that they all refer to the

¹¹⁰ Bhat happened to be a Shivalli Brahmin who are otherwise regarded with some animosity by the Sthanikas. Bhat stayed with this author's family in Mysore for a few months in the 1970s, when he was perhaps involved in doctoral work. It was then common to seek out relatives, families of the same caste, or those from the same region, to avail of boarding and lodging.

¹¹¹ The original copyright is owned by the Sthanika Dravida Brahmana Sangha (R.) of Udupi, which might indicate that Bhat composed this at their request.

¹¹² P Gururaja Bhat, *Tulunadina Itihasadalli Sthanikaru (Sthanikas in Tulunadu History)*, 2nd reprint (Mangalore: Shri Subrahmanya Sabha, 2008 (first impression 1966)), 1.

¹¹³ Bhat, *Tulunadina Itihasadalli Sthanikaru*, 3.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

same class of temple official. These inscriptions range from the 13th to the 16th centuries. He concludes this section by stating that the *sthanikas* were temple officials, supervising its functioning and administering its properties, and never denoted a separate caste. He further states that this term was never applied to the class of temple servants who were called by different names performing specific functions.¹¹⁵ Instead, the term denoted respect. In the next section, Bhat investigates all the terms that occur in temple inscriptions and denote various roles. Citing sections of different inscriptions, he studies the contexts in which persons named *adiga*, *asranna*, *tantri*, *melushanti*, *kilushanti*, *padamuli*, *bhandari*, *kotttari*, *senabova*, *pathali*, *devadiga*, *padarathi*, and *adipinavaruru* appear. Where these don't appear in inscriptions, he gives short descriptions of their roles from current usage. Among these, *adiga*, *asranna*, *melushanti*, and *kilushanti* are priests of the temple, who are involved in daily worship.¹¹⁶ The *padamuli* cannot be understood clearly, but he infers it to mean one ever in service of the deity.¹¹⁷ The *devadiga* is also a temple servant, who mostly is a musician, like the *padarathi*.¹¹⁸ The *adipinavaruru* are those who sweep the temple. Bhat states that these are not ordinary sweepers, but are important to festivals, the duties of the *tantri*, and in rendering the temple pure.¹¹⁹ In this way, temple service appears to have been highly differentiated, with specific roles to different named classes. In this context, the *sthanikas* are never said to appear. He supplies a chart of the hierarchy of those in temple service, placing the class of officials (*adhikara varga*) above the 'service class' (*sevaka varga*), who are followed by the servant class (*paricharaka varga*). The *sthanika* is included under the class of officials, and even the priests are placed in the service class, reversing the

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 9-11.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 12-13.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 13-14.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 14.

hierarchy that had come to exist in the present.¹²⁰ He concludes that this setup might not have been functioning in all the temples, but in those which were well endowed and acted as centres of political units. Bhat, however, does not address the change in status of the Sthanikas in the recent past.

Conclusion

In the twentieth century, Sthanikas emerge as subjects, of caste and religious communities. Their early activities focused on building a caste association that could contribute to the community's upliftment through education. At this time, they also seem to have protested their description as temple servants and tried to counter this by claiming themselves to be a Brahmin sub-caste called Shiva Brahmins. The activities of the association were driven by a relatively small elite, who had availed themselves of Western education. The early Sthanika writers, of whom NS Shiva Rao is examined here, also belonged to this section. In this case, he also belonged to a large landowning family. These are some indications of social differentiation, which might have been enabled by many Sthanika men serving in the colonial village bureaucracy. The Sthanikas also attempted and succeeded in gaining affiliation with the prestigious Sringeri *matha* and joined other Smarta Brahmins as disciples of its pontiff. This not only related to resolving disputes over status in the public realm, but also enabled them to come together as a religious community. The activities of the Sthanikas attracted the attention of historians who were able to relate them to a bigger class of temple officials who appear in inscriptions over a long time span and over all of south India. They were also found to be

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

mentioned in inscriptions of Tulunadu, denoting an office of respect. Thus, the Sthanikas who were static objects of ethnography in the nineteenth century, turned into objects of historiography, with the acceptance of the idea that their recent past did not accord with their antecedents.

Vignettes from Sthanika Discourses on Caste

“...There was only one man from the Smarta sect, Durgabhata, in this colony of Madhva brahmins. He was always checking and measuring the rival sect's orthodoxy with a questioning eye. He looked sideways at Chandri and cackled:

'Chi Chi Chi, don't be too rash, Acharya. O no, a brahmin isn't lost because he takes a lowborn prostitute. Our ancestors after all came from the North—you can ask Praneshacharya if you wish—history says they cohabited with Dravidian women. Don't think I am being facetious...' (p. 5-6)

— UR Ananthamurthy (tr. AK Ramanujan) in *Samskara*.

“...There is a tradition that the Shivalli Brahmins of the Tulu country came from Ahikshetra. As only males migrated from their home they were compelled to take women from Non-Brahmin Castes [*sic*] as wives... The Shivalli Brahmins are said to be referred to by the Bunts as Mathumagalu or Mathumalu (bride) in allusion to the fact of their wives being taken from the Bunt Caste [*sic*]...' (p. 40)

— MS Achyuta Sharma in *Sri Udupi Kshetrada Naija Chitra mattu Charitrika Hinnele (The true picture of Udupi and its historical background)*, reproducing sections in English from “True copy of page xiv introduction of Vol. I of Thurston's Caste and tribes of South India. [*sic*]”

Introduction

In the early twentieth century, the Sthanikas, by virtue of their exposure to education, and perhaps due to the formation of caste *sabhas* by others, had also mobilized and organized in different ways. Through campaigns such as those to effect a change of the caste name and status, to be admitted as disciples of a *matha*, and to establish a temple of their own, they had tried to distance themselves from demeaning descriptions in the colonial documents, and to assert that

they were indeed Brahmins of the same status as the others. This period also saw the birth of caste histories written by the Sthanikas, that not only made assertions about a glorious past, but indeed showed a curiosity into the reasons for their present-day status. The Sthanikas had been noticed by professional historians, who sought to approach the question through inscriptions found in temples. However, these investigations did not extend to the change in their status and ritual roles in the recent past. In addition, the Sthanika voices that can be heard, did not engage with the particular details of their ethnographic description, though much of it can be inferred indirectly. It is here that an investigation into the wider Sthanika discourses on caste is necessary, where oral and personal narratives play an important role as supplementary sources. There were also many tracts published by Sthanikas from the middle of the century, by NS Shiva Rao, Dr MS Achyuta Sharma, VR Udyavara, and a few others, who expanded on elements of the caste discourse that had appeared earlier. However, these were written by men, for men, in the sense that they were written for consumption by caste publics, where it was the men who played prominent roles. The voices of women and representations of the domestic sphere are completely absent. It is here again, that personal narratives can fill the gaps, though there is much left to be explored here. It is necessary to point out that these discourses arise from different sources, are speaking in different voices, and might be driving at different points. For instance, now rehabilitated as Smarta Brahmins, the polemics of Achyuta Sharma seem to partly belong to a wider debate between Smartas and Madhvas, and Shaivas and Vaishnavas, of a greater lineage in Karnataka's history. This discussion would not be complete, without also trying to understand the reception of the discourses, by the Sthanika caste public, and by others. This chapter, perhaps more conspicuously than the others, turns towards anthropology to support the writing of history.

Sthanikas in the Temple

This anecdote was narrated to be my grandmother.¹ Her great-grandmother was sitting in the precincts of the Adoor Mahalingeshwara Temple. Suddenly, a few children came near her when playing. Their mother, evidently a Havyaka Brahmin, shouted at them, “Don’t touch! Don’t touch her! She is a Sthanika.” This redoubtable old lady immediately hit back with a pithy verse. “You scream ‘don’t touch!’, but don’t you know that however much you bathe, your karma sticks to you?”. VR Udyavara couched his book *Tulunadina Sthanika Brahmanaru* (*Sthanika Brahmins of Tulunadu*) in terms of a personal intellectual discovery, about the origins and nature of the Sthanikas. An inquisitive child, his curiosity in the matter was triggered by various incidents in his childhood. As a four-year-old, he had once gone to the festival at the temple in Kunjuru, where his grandfather was one of the Moktessors.² In the feeding of the Brahmins, a few Shivallis sat down in a row. The Sthanikas also sat down, and the boy was the first in their row. His grandfather turned the banana leaf so that it sat at an angle to the row of the Shivallis. The boy turned it back and did not relent, until he was scolded and told that this was the custom. In the village, his house was surrounded by a few homes belonging to Shivalli and Kota Brahmins. His own family was respected, and he was called a Brahmin boy by the non-Brahmins, either with respect or in mocking. However, the other Brahmins, especially the mothers of his playmates, would call him a ‘sanika’ and warn their children not to touch him.³ The boy would be hurt and confused. In recalling their experiences, many of my interlocutors focused on the ritual space of the temple and the slights that they would face there. In all the

¹ Smt. KV Shankari in conversation with the author, August 2022.

² VR Udyavara, *Tulunadina Sthanika Brahmanaru* (*Sthanika Brahmins of Tulunadu*) (Mangalore: Self-published, 1988), 2.

³ Udyavara, *Tulunadina Sthanika Brahmanaru*, 3.

major temples, the Sthanikas would have to sit in *adda-pankthi* i.e., sit cross-rows with the other Brahmins when they received the *prasada*. Sometimes, the Brahmins would be fed in another place and the Sthanikas would be given the food and asked to serve themselves.⁴ There would be anxiety about this and even attempts at passing, for example, by speaking Tulu in a higher register.⁵ In the Krishna *matha* of Udupi, the *chowki* is considered the sacred space to receive the *prasada*. In a study of the gastrosemantics there, the author notes that only Madhva Brahmins had been allowed here but “recently, Smarthas and Sthanika Brahmins have also been permitted entry.”⁶ Some other Brahmin castes were still refused entry, and there was much ill-feeling among them about it. The guards are said to be “experts at detecting a non-Madhva.”⁷ The presence of the sacred thread, whether they stutter when asked the *gotra*, their mother tongue, and in an “unspecific way, the colour of the skin, the marks on the forehead etc.” help the guards detect the caste or sub-caste.⁸ Even when the temples are run by the Sthanikas, the ritual specialists such as the *tantris* are generally Shivallis who restrict their entry into the sanctum, let alone allowing worship of the deities.⁹ In the past, the *naivedya* or offering of cooked rice that Sthanikas brought to the temple would be strewn on a ritual stone, and topped with some *nirmalya* i.e., flowers or tulsi leaves from the sanctum. The Sthanikas as servants, or those engaged in *devakarya* would then be asked to take away the rice as *prasada*. This did not apply to the other Brahmins, even if they did perform *devakarya*, and was allegedly done only to humiliate the Sthanikas.¹⁰

⁴ Smt. KV Shankari in conversation with the author, August 2022.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ MA Vasudeva Rao, “Gastrosemantics of the Udupi Krishna Matha,” *Sociological Bulletin* (1994), 223.

⁷ Rao, “Gastrosemantics of the Udupi Krishna Matha”, 223.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Yaji Diwakar Bhat (Tantri, Pavanje Jnanashakti Subrahmanya Temple), in discussion with the author, April 2023.

¹⁰ Ibid. Narayana Bhattaru, the son of Vasu Bhattaru of Pavanje is supposed to have vehemently rejected this practice. He also went around asking other Sthanikas to stop partaking of the rice.

Narratives such as these capture the experience, especially those of women and children, which do not otherwise feature in printed material. Through these accounts, there are clearly many connections to details provided by ethnographers starting with Buchanan. It is possible that Sthanika women were considered polluting, not only due to lower caste status, but also perhaps due to their alleged unchastity. Children at home and in the street, might very well have been associated with the mother and the same impurity might have been attributed to them. In the ritually purified space of the temple, the distinction in status might have been marked by a bar on inter-dining. It should be noted that the Sthanikas were allowed in the temples and given the *prasada*, which would have been denied to most lower castes. The curious repetitive detail in the colonial ethnographies of the rice strewn on the *bali pitham* can also be discerned in the accounts. According to Buchanan, a woman who wishes to become a ‘temple woman’ symbolizes her act by consuming this rice.¹¹ Thurston recounts this as a practice in the neighbouring Mysore province, where such a woman becomes a Malera i.e., a temple servant.¹² Thurston notes that only the Sthanikas partake of this rice, and not the Brahmins.¹³ It may be surmised that the association with this practice could have led to the confounding of the Sthanikas and temple women in the ethnographies.

Fall from Favour

The Sthanika claims of high status in the past are met with some approval from the historians. However, their subsequent degradation has not been a topic of serious research.

¹¹ Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, Vol. III, 65.

¹² Thurston, *Castes and Tribes Vol. VI— P TO S*, 404.

¹³ Thurston, *Castes and Tribes Vol. V— M TO P*, 439.

Again, discourse is sustained by narratives, which offer a few different causes. In 1944, NS Shiva Rao published the relatively refined 12-page pamphlet *Sthanikas of Kanara District (North & South)* in English. It might be seen as a culmination of a long intellectual endeavour, where he revised his earlier thoughts, rejected some theories, and adopted other methods, especially from BA Saletore. Interested as he was in etymology and philology, he was now boosted by Saletore's trove of inscriptional references, through which Rao infers that the officials who were known as *sthanikas* as far back as Kautilya's time, gradually were stripped of their secular duties and limited to the administration of temples.¹⁴ Regarding their duties, he quotes verbatim from Saletore's findings and even defends their applicability to Tulunadu since its rulers had owed allegiance to the "Emperors of the vast Karnataka Empire [*sic*]"¹⁵ and so the general principles of government were the same as the other districts. He also specifically mentions the inscriptions found in this region, including one by the Vijayanagara monarch Bukka made to the "Eighteen Sthanika-Hebbaras of Kukke Sri Subraya Deva Temple at Subramanya [*sic*]"¹⁶ He even takes up his own family name for analysis, providing an etymology for Nattoja as *sthanapanacharya*¹⁷, and for the clan name of the Moroja family as "High Priest [*sic*] of the mayoora kshetra"¹⁸ i.e., the Kukke Subrahmanya Temple. How then, had they lost it all? Rao thinks that the Sthanikas, due to the munificence of the state, began to lead a life of luxury, "probably thought more of their rights and privileges and treated others with contempt."¹⁹ The Madhvas in the time of Vadiraja *swami* had become numerous and his contemporary from a *matha* near Subrahmanya effected

¹⁴ Chera Nattoja Shiva Rao, *Sthanikas of Kanara District (North & South): North of Kumbha and up to Gokarna* (Mangalore: Mangalore Press, 1944), 4. The change of surname from Shara to Chera is an interesting tidbit, on which we can only speculate.

¹⁵ Rao, *Sthanikas of Kanara District (North & South)*, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Taken to mean founder or in this case, the one who established and consecrated a deity.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

changes there by “deceiving the local influential peoples i.e., Sthanika-Hebbaras”.²⁰ The state failed to interfere in the matter and its own downfall shortly after i.e., the decline of Vijayanagara, led to political chaos. Now, other temples began to be converted as an “organised act of dispossessing the Sthanikas” using “force, persuasion, stratagem, diplomacy and propaganda” leading to their complete downfall.²¹ Now, Rao shows knowledge of the demeaning description of the Sthanikas in the gazetteers and the like. He provides a reason for how this happened. The Sthanikas had to act as hosts of the institutions they managed and perform all the duties that the head of a family might undertake. In the past, these had been considered as “special privileges and respectable and honourable by themselves”²², but which during their political descendancy, propaganda presented as duties of temple servants performed in return for the temple properties that they enjoyed. Public opinion is said to have turned against them, and in those days, it counted for much. When the British arrived, the propaganda was repeated to them, which the Sthanikas “being highly disorganized” and at loggerheads with each other did not counter. Thus, the Sthanikas had lost all, even their social status, in the nineteenth century.²³

Starting from the 17th century, Rao pictures the downfall of the Sthanikas to have completed by the advent of British rule. Curiously, another set of narratives in present-day Sthanika discourse presents a short-lived mutiny as the fatal blow to their prestige. Mention has been made of the drastic changes brought in by colonial land and revenue policies. The discontent with the new monetary system was evident in the outbreak of a rebellion in 1837.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 8.

²² Ibid., 9.

²³ Ibid. Interestingly, Rao only blames Sturrock for doing this and chides him for not having consulted other documents, even those authored by colonial officials. He also includes Buchanan’s diary among these. It is probable that Rao had not read these carefully, or at the very least had not read Buchanan, since he was the first to record this calumny.

After the fall of Tipu Sultan, the British had transferred the *maganas* of Sullia and Puttur from Canara to the Raja of Coorg as gratitude for his support.²⁴ Coorg was itself absorbed into Company territory in 1834 after the last king was deposed due to misrule. Sullia and Puttur were transferred back to Canara, where the peasants now had to pay revenue in cash. Many peasants refused to pay the taxes and open rebellion broke out in 1837 when a mysterious mendicant appeared, claiming for himself the throne of Coorg.²⁵ Supported by many leaders such as Kedambadi Rama Gowda, the rebellion of Kalyanaswamy began in Coorg and swiftly spread to Sullia, Puttur and Mangalore, where the rebels ousted the British for a few days. However, the revolt was quickly quelled by an additional reinforcement of troops, and the principal mutineers were hanged or deported. Some Sthanika sources claim their widespread involvement in the rebellion, especially that of the late Dewan of Coorg, Lakshminarayana.²⁶ This mutiny has recently caught the attention of scholars and the imagination of the public.²⁷ The book *Amara Sulyada Raita Horata: 1834-1837 (Peasant Uprising of Sullia)* by Purushottam Bilimale very much takes the route of a history from below, by means of an extensive survey of family narratives. While the earlier historian N Shyam Bhat had only treated it as an economic revolt, Bilimale sees it as very much a peasant uprising, principally of the Gowdas. Having taken this approach, he does mention other communities, including the Sthanika Brahmins.²⁸

²⁴ Bhat, *South Kanara (1799-1860)*, 168.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

²⁶ See the biographical sketch "Dewan Lakshminarayanayyavaru" in Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 35. However, as NS Shiva Rao puts it, it is unlikely that the Sthanikas had any sense of caste identity that might lead to mobilization along these lines in the early nineteenth century.

²⁷ In 2022, a bronze statue of Kedambadi Ramaiah Gowda was inaugurated by the chief minister in Mangalore. See "Mangaluru: Bommai unveils freedom fighter Kedambadi Ramaiah Gowda's statue", *Daijiworld*, Nov. 19, 2022, <https://www.daijiworld.com/news/newsDisplay?newsID=1021357>. Recently, participants in this movement have been hailed as freedom fighters. Even in the biographical sketch of Lakshminarayana, the movement he participated in is called the nation's second and the state's first 'non-co-operation' movement.

²⁸ Purushottama Bilimale, *Amara Sulyada Raita Horata: 1834-1837 (Peasant Uprising of Sullia)* (Shivamogga: Aharnishi Prakashana, 2021), 70-71. As a small tidbit, Bilimale opines that Kukke Subrahmanya was a centre of

Lakshminarayana is only said to have fallen afoul of the British, but Bilimale names an associate of his, Karanika Subbayya, who was hanged for his participation.²⁹ This shift in historiography might well be a nod to Sthanika claims. The claim is also made that Sthanikas who happened to be *potails* and *shanbhogues* lent support to the revolt and were later removed from government service as collaborators.³⁰ Colonial resistance in the nineteenth century is credited with both the downfall of the Sthanikas and for the other Brahmins rising in favour at their expense.³¹

The Shivallis and the Madhyas

MS Achyuta Sharma is remembered for many reasons. An Ayurveda doctor, he is supposed to have been an underground Congress worker in the 1940s.³² He is remembered as the only caste elder who actually agitated for the Sthanikas and confronted the powers that be.³³ These include activities as a trustee of the Kukke Subrahmanya Temple to which he was selected in 1953³⁴, petitions to courts, and several controversial writings that rely heavily on judicial archives. Three of these are purportedly about major temples and pilgrimage centres of Tulu Nadu but carry a parallel purpose.³⁵ Each has portions that can be read as a tourist guide, but the rest of the book contains histories, even ‘hidden histories’. The temples of Puttur, Polali, Subrahmanya and Udipi are all major temples of the region as well as cash-rich properties of the state

serpent worship for the Malekudiya tribals in the region, and that it passed to the Brahmins only under Vijayanagara rule. See Bilimale, *Amara Sulyada Raita Horata: 1834-1837*, 47.

²⁹ Ibid., 70. Karanika is again an occupation, meaning a scribe.

³⁰ Karun Rao Belle (Secretary, Sri Subrahmanya Sabha), in discussion with the author, January 2023.

³¹ NK Jagannivasa Rao (Former Secretary, Sri Subrahmanya Sabha), in discussion with the author, February 2023.

³² See the biographical sketch “Dr. MS Achyuta Sharma, L.I.M.” in Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 40.

³³ Karun Rao Belle (Secretary, Sri Subrahmanya Sabha), in discussion with the author, January 2023.

³⁴ Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 40.

³⁵ See the books by MS Achyuta Sharma in the Bibliography.

government, except for Udupi.³⁶ Thus, Sharma's claims of Sthanika connections and ownership are not insignificant, and even seem to have generated controversy at the time.³⁷ It is not possible to make a detailed study of all of his writings at this juncture, but it is necessary to invoke at least one vector of Sthanika caste discourse i.e., that of sectarian othering. The blame is clearly laid on the Shivallis, who are almost all Madhvas, as the class that turned the Sthanikas out of their former positions at the temples, and as the community that demeaned them in the name of orthodoxy. However, the peculiar fact is that it is only in Tulunadu that the Shivallis, as Madhvas and Vaishnavas, officiate as priests of a predominantly Shaiva pantheon.³⁸ This is brought up repeatedly to allege duplicity of the Shivallis in worshipping deities that they do not revere, and that these were all temples of the Sthanikas that were taken over. The Madhvas are said to keep the *saligrama* stone which symbolizes Vishnu and worship it instead.³⁹ In making this case, the Sthanikas lay stress on their claims as Smartas and disciples of Shankaracharya, who supposedly allowed the worship of a pantheon of deities centred around Shiva. In addition, it is claimed that the Smarta sect had prevailed prior to the evangelizing by Madhvacharya and his disciples.⁴⁰ Combining this with the rhetoric of being the original Brahmins of the land, the Sthanikas come to represent the primordial population, out of which many converted to the Madhva sect. Rao mentions the setting up of the Adwaita Samiti as an "inter-communal association of Pancha

³⁶ Kukke Subrahmanya is the richest temple in Karnataka. The other temples have been recently renovated at considerable expense. "Praying outside temple will not reach the god, says the richest temple in Karnataka", June 14, 2018, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/india/praying-outside-temple-will-not-reach-the-god-says-the-richest-temple-in-karnataka-2590037.html>

³⁷ His books are reported to have been burnt. Chethan Sharma (grandson of MS Achyuta Sharma) in conversation with the author, February 2022.

³⁸ MS Achyuta Sharma, *Kukke Sri Subrahmanya Kshetra: Idara Samshodhanatmaka Itihasika Hinnele (Kukke Subrahmanya: An investigation into its historical background)* (Mangalore: Satyashodha Prakashana, 1970), 34.

³⁹ Sharma, *Kukke Sri Subrahmanya Kshetra*, 31. This practice was confirmed in a private conversation, though it is explained as the form of worship for any deity in *dvaita* practice. Due to constraints of space, it is not possible here to present the other side, as it were. N Srinavasa Acharya (Asst. Professor, Dept. of Philosophy, MAHE) in conversation with the author, October 2022.

⁴⁰ Sharma, *Kukke Sri Subrahmanya Kshetra*, 32.

Dravida Brahmins”, with the objective of spreading *advaita* philosophy and uniting the Smarta Brahmins.⁴¹ In the case of Subrahmanya, Rao alleges that a Madhva *swami* succeeded in building a “Vedavyasa-Shaligrama [*sic*]”⁴² sanctum in the inner precinct of the temple. It is also claimed that worship in the temple was handed over to a Shivalli Brahmin, negating the right of a Sthanika from nearby.⁴³ Sharma expands this through a detailed study of the judicial archives to narrate a progressive series of steps through which some locals, who had inherited rights at the temple lost them, until the temple passed entirely to the Shivallis.

Conclusion

The multiple identities that the Sthanikas associate themselves with, as the original Brahmins of Tulunadu, or as temple officials, or as Smartas, lead to a multi-layered discourse, with borrowings between them. These were conveyed through many writings, by men of different orientations, often with different intentions in mind. While NS Shiva Rao comes across as an erudite scholar, MS Achyuta Sharma presents stinging criticism of the Madhvas and unabashed allegations of the underhanded ways in which they supposedly usurped the Sthanikas. It is also necessary to keep in mind that much of the caste discourses is carried orally and live in personal narratives. While these are sometimes obvious as derivative of an article or a piece of writing at some point, often they provide details that these writings do not. This is especially the case with the perspectives of women and children, those who did not write and seem to have not

⁴¹ Rao, *Sthanikas of Kanara District (North & South)*, 11. Sharma was active in the Samiti, as indeed was Udyavara. See Editorial Committee, *Nooru Hejje*, 40 and Udyavara, *Tulunadina Sthanika Brahmanaru*, 3.

⁴² Rao, *Sthanikas of Kanara District (North & South)*, 7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8.

mattered as readers. This chapter shows that much can be examined and much remains to be said about Sthanika ideas of themselves and of the past. An intriguing line of inquiry is the interference of the colonial government into temple administration, since the operations of the judiciary and other official apparatus are central to Sharma's polemic. The opening paragraph presents a passage from the famous Kannada novel *Samskara* by the Jnanapith awardee UR Ananthamurthy. It is a highly allegorical novel, that only happens to use the setting of an orthodox *agrahara* and its Madhva Brahmin inhabitants. However, it reveals a few themes of caste purity, and the claims on virtue made in the atmosphere of traditional Brahmin life in the Malnad, directly adjacent to Tulunadu. It is followed by a snippet that Sharma had inserted into one of his books, as he was apt to do with all of his sources. It shows that he could take recourse to those very themes of traditional discourse, and use the same ethnographical works that had demeaned the Sthanikas to turn the tables on his adversaries. It shows that anxieties over status, the fear of miscegenation, and wounds of caste prejudice are a familiar story.

Conclusion

This social history of the Sthanikas from the dawn of the nineteenth century and direct colonial rule in Tulunadu, presents an example of caste mobility in a decidedly upper-caste group. There is a clear contrast between colonial representations of the Sthanikas in the nineteenth century and their self-representations in the twentieth century. In the former, they appear in the record as objects of an Orientalist ethnography, where the narrative of their origin seems to have piqued curiosity but was also accepted at face value and never invited serious study. It is also surprising that this one group and its regional caste name were singled out in the classification system of the census, despite the presence of similar groups in other areas of the Madras Presidency. However, as the example of the Mixed Castes, or Satanis demonstrates, the schemes for classification could arise out of some officer's imagination, or model of caste, and be retained despite evidence to the contrary. The Sthanikas on the other hand, were not simply an artefact of the colonial knowledge apparatus but had a concrete existence. They were a distinct group by the early nineteenth century, and other sources, such as the *kaifiyats* point to a more complicated social life. From the twentieth century, there is unmistakable evidence that the Sthanikas perceived themselves as a group, one that was equal to the other Brahmin castes, even though they had seen a decline in their social status. The early records of their activities as caste publics show two trends, namely attempts to effect outward changes in their name and description, and a more inward-looking effort in uplifting themselves through education. It is apparent that the official caste description of temple servants did not apply to the small community of caste leaders who led these efforts. The social differentiation is visible in the education the elite gained and in their occupations. However, it is also points to a similar diversity in the recent past. Colonial revenue policies had brought significant changes in the nineteenth century, and

Sthanikas, whether they owned land themselves or managed temple properties, would have been affected. It seems likely that many men from the caste joined the colonial village bureaucracy and gained some social and economic mobility.

Narratives play an important role in Sthanika discourses on caste. There is a dialectic between the textually inscribed role of the Sthanikas and their social existence that is markedly different from it. This has proved to be enormously productive, starting with caste histories written by amateur scholars, that led to important historical research into the administrative systems of south India. History is central to these narratives, and is invoked repeatedly, since the past was thought to be quite different from the present, and its evolution into the present needed to be explained. These narratives overflow what has been written about so far and live on in family histories and traditions. They are also central to Sthanika identity, as distinct from others, and help a small community to imagine for themselves a greater role in the past. While families or groups in villages might have been identified as Sthanikas, the creation of an identity was very much a result of activities in the early twentieth century, such as those of the Subrahmanya Sabha. It is likely that NS Shiva Rao's description of the Sthanikas prior to this epoch is correct, as isolated communities living independently in a few regions separated by forests and dangerous roads. The institutions of the *sabha*, temple, and the *matha* played a vital role in bringing the Sthanikas under the same tent, and for providing a new basis for their social existence. These continue to remain vital today, determining the annual festival calendar and ritual life of the community, especially as it has spread beyond the native district. The creation of an identity and a community based on it demands criteria for inclusion and exclusion. The idea that a natural community existed, either as ethnography would have it in terms of a textual delineation, or as one based on kinship ties, is simplistic. Investigating how the present-day

community came into being, from the diverse social fabric of a thickly forested region, which rubs shoulders with many cultural and linguistic zones, might prove to be a productive exercise.

Whatever their previous history, the Sthanikas were affected fundamentally by colonialism. Their narratives point to it causing their downfall, even as a sudden occurrence as in the case of the 1837 rebellion. These originated in the writings of a few educated men who had gained employment in the cities, and who also shouldered leadership of the association. Such narratives circulate in the middle-class home, but lack the voices of women and children, who did not constitute the caste public. The government takeover of temples and the introduction of a new administration and judicial system are also blamed for marginalizing the Sthanikas. In other words, they contend that what the gazetteers recorded was not the Sthanikas as they were, but as they had been impacted by colonialism. There is a larger point here about the transformations ushered in by colonialism on social relations that had been mediated by land. The temple had also been a landholder in the premodern past, and perhaps many communities were affected by the remaking of the temple as a colonial-modern institution. The temple had anchored one kind of precolonial public, by virtue of its central role in village life. Its transformation into a different public mediated by law, and the creation of separate caste publics, are important phenomena. The Brahmins, who are both the antagonists and the desired object for the Sthanikas in terms of status, must also have changed along with them, both in the religious realm, and the secular settings of the street and marketplace. They are recognizable in the formation of a new bourgeois middle class with hybrid sensibilities, and for forming the intellectual core of a modernizing India. In this flux, there must have been many ways for being a Brahmin. The modern Sthanikas, it may be suggested, provide an example of one such distinct experience, of being subaltern Brahmins in a small but central arena of Indian modernity.

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