

(Preliminary Issue.)

The
Ethnographical Survey of Mysore.

V.

BESTHA CASTE.

BY

H. Y. NANJUNDAYYA, M.A., M.L.

BANGALORE:
PRINTED AT THE GOVERNMENT PRESS
1906.

Price 4 Annas.

CONTENTS.

	Page.
Name	1
Origin	1
Exogamous divisions	2
Names	2
Caste constitution	3
Adoption	3
Marriages	3—7
Kudike	7
Puberty	7
Adultery and divorce	7
Widow marriage	8
Polygamy	8
Inheritance	8
Death and funeral ceremonies	8—10
Religion	10
Occupation	11
Superstitions	12
Food	12
Privileges	12

BESTAS.

The Besta (ಬೆಸ್ಟ) caste has, according to the last Census, a population 153,174 persons, of whom 75,107 were males and 77,067 females. They live scattered all over the State, but are found in large numbers in the river districts of Shimoga and Mysore.

The name of the caste is derived from the Kannada word *besada* (ಬೆಸವ), thrown. Some curiously derive it from *Betta-hasta* or *Vetra-hasta*, meaning one holding a cane, and this fanciful etymology is based on the following legend. Once upon a time Varuna invited the *Sapta* Rishis to attend a sacrifice he was celebrating. They agreed to go if he would expel the disturbers of their penance, the land and the aquatic animals from the face of the earth. He worshipped and sought the help of God Iswara who sent Ganga from whom were sprung Suparnaraju, Guharaju and Suta with thirty-two weapons in their hands. One of the weapons was a cane or stick, and descent is traced for this caste from these semi-divine personages.

Several other legends are given, each giving the origin of the whole or a sub-division of the caste. One legend tells that *Sutaru* or *Sutakuladavaru* (ಸೂತರು, ಸೂತ ಕುಲದವರು) are sprung from a person who, when Varuna came out of Ganga, carried him over in a boat and landed him. Another legend is to the effect that Santana *Chakravarti* had connection with Satyavati, a low caste boatman's girl, who thus became the step-mother of Bhishma who was his son by his other wife Ganga. Since Bhishma, otherwise called Gangasuta, was a Besta, being in a way the son of Satyavati whose children were all Bestas, the latter got the appellation of Gangasutas or in Kannada *Gangemakkalu* (ಗಂಗೆಮಕ್ಕಳು) like Bhishma.

The attendants of Varuna have given to their descendants the name of *Parivaradavaru* (ಪರಿವಾರದವರು), meaning retinue of serving men.

The less usual names, as given by Nanjangud informants, are Dushyanta, Nishada or Parasava, Dasa or Margava. According to Manu, a Dushyantha is the son of a Kshatriya father and a Brahman mother. A Nishada, who is to live by fishing and snaring animals, is born of a Brahmin father and a Sudra mother. . Lastly a Dasa or Margava who is to subsist by working as a boatman is the son of a Nishada father and an *Ayogava* mother. These names are not in vogue, and were apparently suggested for the occasion, by some Brahman instructor, as high-sounding titles.

All these attempts have merely arisen from the motive of making out a superior origin for the caste which, as its main occupation is boating and fishing in the waters, has adopted the name of *Gangaputras* or *Gangemakkalu*, children of water, which furnishes them with their means of livelihood. It may be noted that in Northern India, some inferior Brahmans who worship the Ganga at holy places call themselves *Gangaputras*.

Exogamous
Divisions.

The following names are given as denoting the exogamous divisions or *Kulas* existing in this community: viz., the *Kulas* of *Chinna* (gold), *Belli* (silver), *Surya* (sun) *Chendra* (moon), *Devi* (goddess), *Suta* (charioteer), *Mugilu* (cloud), *Bhashinga* (marriage chaplet), *Muttu* (pearl), *Ratna* (precious stone), *Kasturi* (musk), *Havala* (coral bead) and *Mallige* (jasmine). There are two others called *Manjiravallu* and *Kadinavallu*, but the significance of the terms cannot be made out.

It is said that silver ornaments are not worn by those of the *Belli Kula* except during marriages.

Kasyapa and *Kaundinya gotras*, called after the *Rishi* *Kasyapa* and *Kaundinya*, are said to be found in all the endogamous divisions. These *gotras* do not stand in the way of marriages within themselves as they do with Brahmans, and seem to have come into existence from a desire on the part of this caste to raise themselves in the social scale.

Names.

Raju, *Nayaka* and *Boyi* are the titles usually affixed to the names of male persons.

There is no peculiarity in the names adopted in this caste. Generally ancestral names and the names of

family deities are given to persons. *Tayamma* and *Puttusami* may be given as examples of terms of endearment. Opprobrious names are sometimes given to children born after loss of other children, such as *Kadamma* (jungle), *Tippamma* (dunghill) and *Javaraya* (god of death).

This caste admits persons of superior castes in the social scale, after the following ceremony. The elders and the representatives of the Besta families gather together in a garden. The aspirant for admission bathes after getting shaved and goes to a temple, where he receives the holy water given by the priest, which he drinks and sprinkles over his head. He is then smeared with ashes all over the body by the caste headman. A feast is given to the caste men at which he collects a morsel from each and partakes of the meal along with the others. Thenceforth he is reckoned as a member of the caste.

Caste constitution.

The elders of the caste are the *Dodda Yajman* (Senior Elder), *Chikka Yajman* (Junior Elder) and *Desa Setti*. The *Dodda Yajman* has the power of enquiring into and awarding punishment of excommunication or fine for breaches of caste customs. The *Chikka Yajman* is his personal assistant and is also called *Kolkar* (literally, stick bearer), because he carries a stick as the symbol of his authority. His duties are to collect caste people to join in the funerals or to form a caste council or *Panchayat* to discuss, when necessary, and judge questions relating to the caste. Punishments awarded by the Council or *Dodda Yajman* are to be proclaimed by the *Kolkar*.

The *Desa Setti* is the local head of the section. He gets the first *margada tambula* consisting of two coconuts, plantains, betel-leaves and money about eight annas, in all ceremonies. The Senior *Yajman* gets a double *tambula*.

Adoption of a son is recognized. A boy belonging to the section of the adopting father is more generally selected than one belonging to other sections. A younger brother is prohibited from being adopted by his elder brother. The adopted boy is disabled from marrying within the prohibited degrees of relationship of either the adoptive or his natural family.

Adoption.

The marriage should be confined within the same sub-division and those of the same *kula* cannot marry each other. The same rules of restriction on account of blood

Marriage.

relationship as in other castes have to be observed. Two sisters cannot be simultaneously married to the same person. They may be married to two brothers, the elder marrying the elder sister, the younger marrying the younger sister. A man belonging to a family following the profession of agriculture does not give his daughter to a person following the profession of fishing, or *vice versa*. Similarly with palanquin-bearers neither the former nor the latter make marriage alliances.

If a marriage take place outside the endogamous circle, the parties lose caste and are regarded as among the half-caste persons, such as those of illegitimate birth.

Age of marriage.

A Besta girl may remain unmarried. The practice of dedicating Basavis, though it exists, is getting into disfavour. Exchange of daughters is in vogue.

Both infant and adult marriages are allowed to take place. In the case of the former, a girl is married at the age of about twelve years. She lives with her parents till the consummation of the marriage takes place. Girls are not married to trees, swords, or other inanimate objects. Adult marriages take place generally within the first year after puberty. If a young woman is left unmarried for a long time after that, her chastity is questioned and thereafter only marriage by *Kudike* form is allowed to her.

If a girl has become pregnant before marriage by a man of her caste, she is allowed to marry her lover in the *Kudike* form. If he does not take her in marriage, he will be put out of caste, and she may join any other man in marriage, and her children, if any, will be affiliated to him. If she has lived with a man of another caste, she will be outcasted.

Marriage ceremonies.

Marriages are generally settled by the parents or guardians. The proposal comes from the father of the boy, who with a few friends goes to the house of the intended bride at an auspicious hour with cocoanuts, turmeric, red and yellow, betel-leaves and nuts. If consent is given by the other party, a letter of invitation and agreement is written then and there. A priest is called in to fix the day of marriage. The letters of invitation are worshipped by both the parties, and each party presents his letter to the other in a formal manner.

Three, five or seven days before *Chappara* or Pandal ceremony, the intended bride and bridegroom are made to exhibit themselves at a gathering of friends and relatives and an *arati** takes place.

The day previous to *Chappara* earthen vessels are newly brought to the house, and Dasaris and Jogis are fed there.

The construction of the *Chappara* or the Pandal is the first of the important ceremonies of marriage. It consists of twelve pillars of which one must be of juicy *kalli* wood in the case of Kannada Bestas, and in the case of others, of *Nerale* or *Kondamavu* tree. This post is known as *halu kambha* (milk post) or *muhurta kambha* (marriage post). The *Chikka Yajman* of the caste attended with drums and gongs, goes to the tree with married women to bring the milk post. He worships the tree and cuts a branch of it. It is brought home and fixed in a pit already formed and spread with milk and ghee at the bottom. A cloth package containing seven kinds of grain is tied to it; and it is sprinkled over with water in which coral and gold are washed, and painted with red and white stripes.

In the evening, a *kankana* consisting of white woollen thread to which are tied a piece of turmeric root and an iron ring, is tied to the bridegroom's hand.

On the second day, water is brought from a pond in vessels by married women. The Dasari worships the pond and idols. The bridegroom's sister brings one of the *Kalasa* pots (styled ಒಡಪಟ್ಟಿದ ಗಡಿಗೆ or sister's pot) decorated with *hombale* (arecanut flower). They come back in procession, walking over cloths spread in the street by a washerman (ನಡೆವಾಡಿ), and with *maneseve* (ಮಣೇಸೇವೆ) at intervals. The latter is described as follows :—

As the procession is moving, they spread a cloth on the ground in front, and place on it in six places, a small quantity of fruit *rasayana*.† Then the Dasayyas blowing the conch and beating gong with cries of ah ! ah ! ah ! go round and round the cloth three times,

* *Arati* is the ceremony of waving over the bride and bridegroom a platter containing coloured water.

† *Rasayana* is a sweet compound, generally made by mixing together plantains, cocoanut, and jaggery with cardamoms or pepper as spices, the whole mashed together.

and eat up the sweet stuff picking it up with their lips. This is repeated a number of times before they reach the marriage house. Two Dasayyas will hold the idols in their hands, and walk in front without taking part in the *maneseve*. These are followed by the *Odahuttidagadige* (ಒಡಹುತ್ತಿದಗದಿಗ) bearer. The idols and the water pot are placed in a room and worshipped till the marriage is over.

Among Saivas instead of *maneseve* (ಮನೇಸೇವೆ), the Joga-
yaya worships Trisula (ತ್ರಿಶೂಲ), and brings home the water vessel.

Muhurtha or Dhare takes place on the third day. A *Nerale* (Jambolana) branch is taken to a Peepul tree and puja offered to it, and it is then brought home and again worshipped. The bridegroom furnished with a spear or dagger is led in procession to a temple, where the relatives and friends of the bridal parties are gathered by invitation. The bride in the meanwhile comes into the marriage house and takes her seat on the plank. The bridegroom comes back from the temple holding a dagger in his right hand, and sits facing the bride while a screen separates the two. The names of the immediate ancestors of both the parties are repeated. The parents pour *dhare niru* * on the united hands of the bridegroom and the bride. The screen is taken off and the *tali*, a golden disc, the symbol of the marriage bond, is tied round the neck of the bride by the bridegroom. Rice newly prepared out of paddy for the occasion is poured in plenty on the bridal party. The ends of the cloths of the newly united couple are tied together, and they prostrate themselves before their seniors who bless them in return with wishes of a long and happy married life.

The fourth day is the last day of the marriage. The *kankana* is untied by the married ladies and placed in a plate containing jaggory and rice. Then takes place the *Kamba Sastra* or 'Pillar' ceremony. At this, the newly married couple place a handful of cooked rice on a wet cloth in front of each pillar and do puja. After the procession through the village is over, the milk post is

* Dhare Niru means water in drops. When any gift is made in a solemn religious manner, a few drops of water with a few Tolasi (Basil) leaves and sometimes a small coin is put into the hands of the recipient by the donor. The water falls in *dhara* or drops, and the gift of a girl in marriage being one of the most solemn of such acts, the ceremony is commonly denoted by the single word 'dhare'.

worshipped and in the end it is smeared over with ashes. This is the final act of the ceremony.

The bride-price is Rs. 12. This goes to the bride's family, father, mother or brother. It is given in the presence of all during the 'dhare.' The price of the bride married for the second time is six rupees. Bride price.

The marriage expenses come to about fifty rupees, of which the major portion goes for feasting.

In a marriage by *Kudike*, it is the male members only and not married women that attend the ceremony. Women who are thus married are not allowed to take part in marriage and other auspicious occasions. Kudike.

A girl attains her age of puberty at about her sixteenth year. She is kept in a shed for three days, during which period she is considered impure. Soon after the signs are observed, she is made to sit on a plank, married women wave the *arati* or coloured water before her, and on the fourth day she bathes. Till the eleventh day after the bath, married women gather round her and make *arati* in the evenings. On the sixteenth day, consummation of marriage generally takes place. The shed in which the girl was lodged at the time of her first *menses*, is burnt up. Puberty.

During the ordinary monthly periods, a woman bathes on the first day only, and remains in a portion of the house for three days, during which period she does not enter the kitchen but does other household duties.

When a girl is for the first time sent to her husband after the consummation of marriage, she is presented with new cloths and *madalakki* (ಮದಲಕ್ಕಿ), i.e., rice placed in her tying cloth, with jaggory, cocoanut, some fruits, betel-leaves and nuts.

When a child-birth takes place, the mother is kept in a separate room, at the door of which a hatchet, margosa leaves, an old shoe and a broomstick are placed to keep off evil spirits. The period of ten days from the day of the birth of a child is one of pollution. On the eleventh day, a bath is given to the mother and child.

Adultery within the caste is tolerated ; but the woman and her lover will be compelled to pay her husband's marriage expenses in case she wants to live permanently with her lover. Sometimes it is settled by a small fine paid to Adultery and divorce.

the caste, and the money is used for a general feast of the caste people.

Divorce is allowed on the ground of unchastity on the part of the wife. She may marry again in the *Kudike* form after divorce. One-half of the first husband's marriage expenses must be refunded by the new husband, in return for which the former unties the *tali* and renounces his matrimonial rights over her.

Remarriage.

The remarriage of widows is permitted if the widow and her new husband pay to the caste a fine of rupees six and rupees eight, respectively. A widow may marry her husband's elder brother but such marriages are rare. The caste in such cases demands an additional fine of a few rupees.

Children of a widow by her second husband cannot claim the property of their mother's first husband. Similarly sons by her first husband cannot succeed to the property of her second husband. If a man has children both by his legal wife and his concubine and if they all live together, the children of the concubine can claim shares in the property of their natural father.

Polygamy and polyandry.

Polyandry is unknown but polygamy is freely practised. Barrenness, defect in body or mind and unchastity on the part of the first wife are the principal reasons for one to take another wife. The first wife's sister is generally preferred as a second wife.

Inheritance.

A son-in-law remaining with his father-in-law, is stated to be entitled to inherit the property of his father-in-law, provided he performs the latter's obsequies. In other respects, the members of the caste follow the general Hindu law of inheritance.

Death and funeral ceremonies.

The dead body is generally buried, but when the person has died very old or has otherwise been held in great esteem, his corpse is burnt. During the last moments of a man, all the relatives and caste people gather to take part in the funerals. A few grains of rice are put in the mouth of the defunct person by all the relatives and friends as a last mark of regard for him. The widowed wife worships the body and exchanges betel-leaves with it. If a married woman dies before her husband, her body is laid in a litter constructed of green leaves and flowers and smeared with turmeric powder.

The dead body is generally carried in a frame of bamboo, and where the parties can afford the expense, the frame is decorated with flowers. It is placed on the ground somewhere while half way towards the burial ground, where the son or other person officiating as the chief mourner goes round it with a pot of boiled rice in his hands and smashes the pot on the ground, nearest the head of the corpse.

The dead are buried with their head turned to the South. A new cloth, a plantain leaf and a small copper coin stuck in the dead man's nose are the only things interred with him. This custom has given rise to a proverb in Kannada, which means "Though you earned so much, pity you are left without a pie in your nose."* A new cloth, rice, betel-leaves and a few coins are laid on the grave and the *toti* of the village is bid to take them as his fees and price for the ground. Before the earth is thrown over the body, a vessel containing some boiled rice is again taken round the grave three times and smashed. If the body is burned, its remains and ashes are thrown in a pond or river on the third day. Milk and ghee are poured on the grave. If it is the husband that is dead, the woman takes off her bangles, *tali*, etc., and throws them on the grave. Henceforward she ceases to paint herself with turmeric paste.

The period of mourning lasts for ten days. On the eleventh day, the caste people are fed. A temple is visited by the chief mourner and cocoanuts are presented to the god and broken in his name. This ceremony is meant to open the gates of heaven more easily for the entry of the departed soul. During the period of mourning, no festivities are observed. Milk and sugar are not used for food and caste marks are not put on the face. The whole period of mourning is considered to be one of pollution.

Agnate relations observe the full period of mourning for the death of an adult, while they do not observe any mourning for the death of a child. The parents observe three days of mourning for the death of their infant children.

For the propitiation of the ancestors in general, a *yade* (ಯಡೆ) consisting of all the articles of food and plantain

* ಇಷ್ಟು ಸಂಪಾದನೆಮಾಡಿ ಮೂಗಿನೊಳಕ್ಕೆ ಬಂದು ಕಾಸಿಲ್ಲದೆ ಹೋದೆಯಾ.

leaves and coins, is presented to a Purohit on the Mahalaya day. Religious mendicants such as Dasayyas are fed. Ceremonies for deceased individuals are not performed periodically.

Brahmans are not required to assist at the funeral ceremonies which are carried on with the aid of the caste men alone, who may be instructed what to do by the Brahmans.

Religion.

These are Hindus by religion and worship the ordinary divinties, and have both Saivas and Vaishnavas * among them. The Saivas worship Siddappaji and Rajappaji.

There are two religious mendicant orders in this caste called *Jogis* (ಜೋಗಿಗಳು) and *Dasaris* (ದಾಸರಿಗಳು). The *Jogis* are Saivas and are the devotees of *Chunchanagiri Baire Devaru* (ಚುಂಚನಗಿರಿ ಬೈರದೇವರು). They carry a horn (ಕಿಂಗಿ) which emits a shrill sound and *Kamakshi mudra* (ಕಾಮಾಕ್ಷಿ ಮುದ್ರೆ); and they annually send an offering of money to *Baire Devaru* (ಬೈರದೇವರು). This god they worship on Sundays if not daily. The *Dasaris* are worshippers of Vishnu and followers of Ramanujacharya. Their principal god is Ranganatha on the Biligiri Rangan hill. Both these mendicant orders eat animal food and drink alcoholic liquors. The other Bestas can intermarry with them.

Tolasamma (ತೊಲಸಮ್ಮ), wife of Biligiri Ranga, Maramma (ಮಾರಮ್ಮ), Uttanahallyamma, (ಉತ್ತನಹಳ್ಳಿಯಮ್ಮ), Patalamma (ಪಟಾಲಮ್ಮ), and Kalamma (ಕಾಳಮ್ಮ), are their deities. These have jurisdiction within certain limits of territory, and are to be annually propitiated for the welfare of the locality by holding *jatras* or festivals, on which occasions buffaloes, sheep and fowls, are often sacrificed. The remains of the animals slaughtered for sacrifice are partaken of by the people. The carcasses of buffaloes are given away to Madigas. Individual offerings are given after every recovery from a bad disease such as small-pox and cholera. During epidemic seasons, special offerings are made to the local deities to induce them to turn out the intruding goddesses of the prevailing epidemic.

Pujaris of this caste worship these deities daily in the temples built for them. At the annual festivities in front

* Worshippers of Siva and Vishnu respectively as their supreme deity.

of the temple of Maramma, a *Sidi* (ಸಿಡಿ) is played. A perpendicular beam of about fifteen feet supports and acts as a pivot to another horizontal beam. To the free end of the latter, a devotee who has made a vow suspends himself by getting the hook passed through the flesh at the back. The beam is turned round and when it completes one turn, the devotee is taken down and he falls prostrate before the deity. The priest then gives him *Prasada* (ಪ್ರಸಾದ).

Near the *Sidi*, 'fire-treading' takes place. A pit about 9 feet by 3 feet with a depth of 4 feet is filled with burning cinders. The devotees tread the fire and walk the whole length without wincing.

Natural objects are revered and are accorded the ranks of gods and goddesses. Thus streams in high floods are worshipped. A new cloth, turmeric powder, and a pair of new bamboo winnows are thrown in and floated away with the current. Snakes and ant-hills are no less important as objects of reverence. On *Nagara chauti* day, *puja* is made with flowers and incense to serpent holes, and milk is poured for the snakes to drink. The snake idols, cut in stone and enshrined under *Peepul* and *N neem* trees, are visited with reverence. Lakshmidēvi, the goddess of wealth, is the principal deity of the caste, and they observe a yearly festival in her honour.

On the *Mahanavami* day, fishermen worship their nets, and cultivators their ploughs.

This caste has a comparatively low status. Their main occupations have been fishing, lime burning and palanquin-bearing and cultivation. Of late the profession of fishing is not looked upon as a respectable one, since it leads to the killing of many living beings. Serving as grooms, sweepers, and elephant drivers is also condemned. Occupation.

Nets are prepared by them in the old fashion and they never purchase them in the bazaar or use those not made by themselves. The principal instruments they use for fishing are a cane with a long line, to which are attached a hook and bait at the end. The husks or outer meal of grains well boiled in water and formed into balls are used as bait. These balls are stuck to the ground and a stick waving on water indicates their position. The smell of the balls attracts fish and the fishermen make a sweep

of them with their net where they get themselves entangled. Earth worms are used for the cane lines as bait.

Superstitious.

In their caste assemblies, an accused person or a witness is said to have sworn when he merely goes round the gathering three times. They do not usually touch the fire, or any other objects to take the oath. They believe in omens, oracles and sorcery.

The sight of a jackal and that of a toddy pot are among those regarded as auspicious omens. When any sickness visits a house, they consult Koracha soothsayers, to know whether the ailment is one sent by God or the effect of an evil eye. A new born child is given a name suggested by the soothsayer. In all cases, children's diseases are diagnosed by the soothsayer, and his prescription regarding diseases caused by spirits is followed in detail. For oracles, they go to temples to consult the presiding deity. He is asked to give flowers, and if a flower drops down to the right of the idol, it is taken as a favourable response, while flowers dropped to the left are the reverse. If the deity is reluctant to give any definite indication, he is coaxed by promises of offerings of animals and money. It is believed by them that no devotee supplicating with a faithful spirit, has been disappointed till the present day.

They tie talismans of copper sheet beaten thin with some writing thereon, called *yantru* (ಯಂತ್ರ), round their arms as preventives against attacks of the spirits. Sometimes talismans serve to procure for the wearers children or success in important undertakings.

Food.

The flesh of the following animals are allowed to be used as food:—fowl, sheep, goat, crane, rabbit, crocodile and tortoise. They never eat fowls, sheep, goats, cranes, or other higher order of animals without first offering them to their gods; and they indulge in such luxuries chiefly during festivals. They consider it a virtue to abstain from animal food.

Privileges.

They are entitled to use, at their marriages, a red cloth canopy and palanquin and umbrella. Horses may be ridden by them. Some Bestas of Nanjangud do not use a palanquin, as once upon a time when a bride and bridegroom were going in it in a marriage procession, it accidentally took fire and was burnt.

They belong to the eighteen *Phanas* which are said to be a remnant of the old trade guilds. They do not dine with any of the nine *Phanas* who are their rivals.

In caste status, these are higher than Vaddas and Korachas. They do not take food with Waddas, Korachas, Barbers and Agasas, though all these latter eat in the houses of Bestas.

Bestas are the usual *Pujaris* of Yellamma and Maramma.
