

The world in the village: lessons from K.V. Subbanna's inspirational life in theatre and community

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In this essay I will be telling you the story of a life in the theatre—a life lived in a village called Heggodu in the hills of Karnataka, one of the southern states of India. Kannada is the language of the majority in this state. Heggodu is a short one-hour drive from Shimoga, the district's capital. K.V. Subbanna was born in Heggodu and this is his story—the story of how community, modernism and individual creativity were triangulated in his life, thinking and work.

In one of his essays, Subbanna has quoted D. R. Bendre, the greatest Kannada poet of the twentieth century, in describing his 'dream-theatre':

A thousand audience-families should join together and form a performance-space. The visionaries among them should write plays; the creative constructors should give them a concrete shape; the artistically endowed should enact them; the sensitive respondents should suggest possible improvements; all in all, each and every artist should contribute to this process, on or off stage, in one way or another. All in all, everyone, man and woman, skilled or otherwise, should as one single family ... evaluate the production. A play which gains maturity in such a milieu then becomes a vital instrument of finding life-fulfilment...I am, I admit, an optimistic poet.¹

Subbanna worked tirelessly to translate Bendre's dream into reality. Today, the people of Heggodu are the sponsors, producers, performers, audiences and critics of what is essentially a modern theatre and art practice. Actor, director and editor, Sudhanva Deshpande was 'witness in Heggodu to a conversation between a tea-stall owner and a taxi driver, discussing with great enthusiasm the latest production of *King Lear*, while comparing it with a Lear production of some eight years ago, as well as Kurosawa's *Ran*.'²

How did this come about and why is it important?

Opening act

Subbanna studied at the University of Mysore (which is Karnataka's second largest city) but he then chose to return to his native village. This was somewhat unusual in itself. People in India who go off to the city to get a higher education most often do not return to their place of origin; the opportunities that open up in the city are very difficult to resist. For village people in India, the journey to modernity is normally a journey away from home to the city; it means cutting ties with whatever shaped their early selves, those formed in childhood and adolescence.³ Subbanna took the opposite path: he journeyed back to his village carrying modernism with him. His return to Heggodu was the first act of what was to become his life-long project – to bring the city, the region, the nation, and the world to the village. Subbanna passionately believed that modernism could revitalise even a tradition-bound, feudal community, but only if modernism could take root and be fully integrated in the community. The forces of modernity and modernism were a threat, he felt, only when they cut off individuals from their communities, because this severance produced other divisions – between the village and the city, between the region, the nation and the world – which he fought a lifelong battle to surmount.

Subbanna engaged in this battle primarily through the Sri Nilakanteshwara Natya Seva Sangh, better known as Ninasam, which he established with some of his friends in Heggodu 60 years ago. What started off as 'an amateur cultural organisation', as Subbanna called it, is today a theatre institute, a film society, a travelling repertory company, a foundation, and much else besides. Ninasam's campus presently houses a 530-seat auditorium and another more intimate space for performance that doubles as a seminar hall. There is also an informal open-air theatre, a rehearsal hall, a library, hostels for students, a guest house, a dining hall and kitchen, and an administrative office. There is no boundary wall separating this cluster of low-cost structures from its surroundings. In Deshpande's words, 'You could ... easily miss a remarkable institution, so seamlessly does it merge, architecturally and otherwise, into the local landscape.'⁴

The Ninasam campus did not come up all at once; it has evolved gradually, in step with Ninasam's growth over many decades. Subbanna was a master of timing: initiatives were introduced when he felt that the institution and the community were ready for them – never too early, never too late. 'It is one of Subbanna's qualities as a leader', cultural scholar Rustom Bharucha has remarked, 'that he knows exactly when the work should be mobilised, and when it should continue at a steady pace.'⁵ One reason why Subbanna knew the right timing was that he was constantly in conversation with his community and, therefore, always had his finger on its pulse.

Milestones

Let me mark, at this point, some of the important milestones of Ninasam's journey to the present:

1949: Ninasam established, with a focus on amateur theatre.

1973: Ninasam Film Society (Ninasam Chitra Samaj) launched. It has organised regular screenings, film festivals of world cinema for rural audiences since 1977 and film appreciation courses for the local community since 1979.

1980: Ninasam Theatre Institute founded. The Institute offers an annual diploma course to 20 students from interior Karnataka. Some of its alumni have gone on to establish theatre groups in their home towns and villages; some others have recently been appointed as drama teachers in government schools.

1983: Janaspandana initiated. This three-year project took Ninasam's plays, film screenings, theatre workshops and film appreciation courses to other parts of rural Karnataka. Some 5,000 people attended the film appreciation courses and 200,000 people watched the films and theatre performances.

1985: Ninasam Tirugata started. The Tirugata – meaning 'travelling around' in Kannada – is an itinerant repertory company, which consolidated the activities of Janaspandana. It also connected meaningfully with the work of the Ninasam Theatre Institute, since the plays are performed by its alumni. Travelling for four months every year, the Tirugata takes four plays and a set of films to almost every corner of Karnataka. It has stopped at nearly 200 locations in the state over the years and given some 2,000 performances. The total audience numbers are approaching 1.5 million.

1987: *Ninasam Mathukathe*, a quarterly newsletter, launched. This carries versions of lectures delivered at Ninasam's workshops and Culture Course (see below) and, occasionally, short essays on relevant issues. It also reports on Ninasam's various activities and announces forthcoming events and new books published by Akshara Prakashana (see below).

1990: Ninasam Culture Course inaugurated. This one-week course expanded the scope of the Theatre and Film Course, introduced in the previous year, which itself had replaced the Film Appreciation Course. Drawing on faculty from all over India, it is conducted with a different theme every year in Heggodu. Interdisciplinary in nature, the course covers film, theatre, literature, the visual arts and issues of culture and politics.

1992: Ninasam Foundation (Ninasam Pratisthana) established. Subbanna created the Foundation's corpus with the cash prize he won along with the Ramon Magsaysay Award for journalism, literature and

creative communication art in 1991. The income is used exclusively for outreach programs – cinema and literature appreciation courses and theatre workshops for young people – conducted in rural and semi-urban locations across Karnataka. In 2003 the Foundation initiated Anusandhana, a series of art appreciation courses held in five colleges in Shimoga district.

In 1956, this time independent of Ninasam, Subbanna established the publishing house, Akshara Prakashana, which shares with Ninasam the goal of disseminating culture and the arts. Its publications on theatre, cinema, literature and the arts in Kannada support Ninasam's work.

The new and the old

What inspired Subbanna and his friends to start Ninasam? He once said in an interview:

We were thinking of building a new India by ourselves because the Britishers [sic] had gone. This is how we started this institution ... we thought theatre was the most appropriate means because it appealed to our community ... We were interested in breaking with tradition and creating something new. Ours was actually a confrontation with tradition – an effort to quarrel with our own tradition.⁶

In the same interview, Subbanna went on to describe Ninasam as 'a continuation of the freedom movement, the social consciousness, the desire for creating a new kind of theatre and a new society.'⁷

Given his emphasis on change it should not come as a surprise to learn that his relationship with his community was not entirely harmonious. He wrote that 'many of us of my generation were in fact infuriated by the poverty, passivity, inequity and superstition around us. We felt that we could not find fulfilment without first kicking away the deadwood of the old ways of life.'⁸ He further observed:

Returning to my home village after a university education, I found it as much impossible to ignore my community as to merge myself with it. I could not live without it, but then I could live with it only by continually quarrelling with it. That is how it has been for scores of years now ... living a life of adversarial coexistence with our community. We have thus never been able to believe that we could articulate ourselves through traditional art forms ... Our sole concern ... has been to evolve a new theatre language voicing a new kind of life.⁹

Nevertheless, the traditional performing art forms provided Subbanna with insights into the relationship between artistic expression, community life and the wider world, and inspired his efforts to root modern theatre and art in his community. For example, he observed that Yakshagana – Karnataka's centuries-old community theatre form – was 'a natural and indispensable part of everyday life' and 'daily routine life, interaction, daily speech and

collective and individual memory carry unmistakable echoes of the rhythm and diction of *Yakshagana*.¹⁰ Such theatre engages the community in an intimate dialogue with itself. Most significantly, the community treats theatre not as an option but a necessity. It is never a mere object for viewing, but a regular ritual in which individuals participate as social beings and meaning acquires a communitarian dimension.¹¹

Subbanna noted, secondly, that the different older and modern forms of theatre in Karnataka have not remained insular. They have drawn 'influences and inspiration from each other, always bringing about a strange admixture or a meaningful and creative confluence'.¹² Yakshagana has remained contemporary also because it has been equally alive to the influences of cinema and television. Popular film melodies, stage settings, electric lights, sound system and make-up alien to Yakshagana have been adopted. Secular texts, Shakespeare and Greek plays, as against texts about deities and divine figures, have also been done in the Yakshagana style.¹³ Indeed, assimilation and integration have marked the history of Kannada theatre, but also more generally the language and culture of this region of India. Tracing the evolution of the Kannada language, and the varied cultural and religious influences on the region, Subbanna concluded that '*Kannadigas* ... have absorbed almost all people, communities, tribes, religions and castes of the world, and Kannada ... has assimilated innumerable languages of the world. Thus, ours is not Kannada of narrow dimensions, but is a world of Kannada, a universe of Kannada.' What is true of Kannada, Subbanna added, is true of 'all the communities and languages ... and they are all, respectively, beings of the world and languages of the world.'¹⁴

Because he felt that communities in Karnataka had absorbed influences from far and wide, Subbanna probably saw no reason to think that the people of Heggodu could not make something hitherto as alien as modern theatre their own — a theatre, moreover, that could be regenerative in 'voicing a new kind of life', stimulating new thinking and spurring new conversations in the community. At the same time, Subbanna firmly believed that we must absorb the influences around us in our own terms: 'We have to accept some of the [modern] technology and assimilate it into ... our lives; but we must not let technology master us!'¹⁵ He was fond of quoting Mahatma Gandhi's lines: 'I will let the winds from all corners blow freely through my house, but I refuse to be blown off my feet.'

Yet how could modern theatre mimic the role of community theatre? How could it become a necessary ritual, an 'indispensable part of everyday life', as natural as the food the people eat? And was there not the very real danger that it would devastate community life instead of strengthening it? Subbanna had no doubt that a community form of modern theatre could not emerge unless the processes of theatre are integrated and aligned with the processes of community. He pointed out that:

... theatre activity in a small community ... naturally entails a dimension of close, intimate communication and communion. In such little communities one has a foreknowledge of one's co-artistes as well as one's audience. One's choice of a play to enact, the style to employ, the interpretation to be provided are all governed not merely by one's own personal preferences but more by the collective conscious or unconscious of one's community ... It is thus not a mere theatre context but a collective socio-political-cultural context where individual choices have to be tempered with a genuine and profound respect and empathy for ... co-beings in the very midst of whom one has to live out one's life, and act out one's convictions and concerns. This dual commitment, on the one hand to one's own self, and on the other to one's environs, is, in fact, what transforms the seemingly mundane act of staging a theatre piece into a socio-cultural process, one which is ... helping to evolve one's own self as well as one's community. It thus becomes a living dialogue ... a 'communion' involving every single individual.¹⁶

In speaking about the reciprocal evolution of the self and the community, Subbanna was again echoing Gandhi. For Gandhi, Subbanna noted, 'progress or development was ... an all-inclusive holistic process. Here, every human being would be able to blossom ... in consonance with his fellow men [sic], to gradually and completely flower out in fulfilling self-expression.'¹⁷ With this as a guiding principle, Subbanna turned his back on certain things one associates with modern theatre. For example, there was no place for 'great' art in his scheme of things. Community theatre cannot idealise excellence, Subbanna felt, and it must reject unrestrained individual creativity and the artist's claim to complete autonomy.¹⁸ Instead, '[b]uilding up ... [Ninasam] ... and even a detail like the selection of a play became a process of coming to an understanding of the community ... [It] has been confrontation, discussion, quarrel, and a striking of balance between ideas.'¹⁹

In Subbanna's view, however, there was place in community theatre for the artist's signature, although individual visions needed to develop in step with the community's consciousness and thinking. He believed that the imagination of the community and the creative powers of the individual must work in tandem: 'Neither would be complete without the other ... communities bereft of the life-giving touch of individual genius are turning barren and ... individuals are losing their way without the caringly guiding hand of their community.'²⁰ Indeed, the pioneering ideas of the individual did not emerge from a void; they were already present in the community, but hidden from view:

As spears have points and milk has cream, communities have imaginative, initiatory individual minds. These intellects stir, tease, taunt the community ... and thereby rejuvenate it. Wisdom is not something that these individual talents produce on their own and distribute among the community. On the contrary, it exists subconsciously, deep-rootedly,

as much in the collective psyche as in the individual psyche. It is like some treasure only waiting to be discovered, and drawn from. The pioneering minds of a community ... through their creative interventions agitate and churn the entire collective. Thereby they bring it a renaissance [sic] life and help disclose the deep-hidden wisdom. Wherever such regenerative interventions are lacking, societies tend to descend into decadence very quickly.²¹

It follows that communities can be regenerated only by interventions from within. The insider-agent of regeneration – in this case Subbanna – had to site the medium of regeneration – modern theatre – in the community. The idea that communities could be revitalised by theatre initiatives inspired from the outside had no place in Subbanna’s way of thinking. It is not likely that he would ever have seriously considered inviting directors to develop ‘awareness-building’ theatre productions with his community; nor would it have crossed his mind to have external facilitators introduce Augusto Boal’s workshop techniques and modes of play making in Heggodu. ‘Ninasam is not radical in that manner,’ Subbanna noted, ‘We have no radical messages to give people, nor do we have the objective of uplifting people. I am not arrogant to say that I have some solutions for my community and will deliver it to them ... My theatre is just a dialogue among members of the community’.²²

If not ‘progressive’ messages and solutions, what could modern theatre offer the community? It could offer new narratives, Subbanna believed, and influence how the community constructed its self-image. The village that is in dialogue with the world can imagine itself differently and it can develop an inclusive sense of its identity. In one interview Subbanna lamented that the world had lost ‘inclusivist’ wisdom, ‘the ability to distinguish, and integrate in the most life-giving manner, the differences and similarities between *Myself* and *Us*. If this inclusivism is part of our exclusivism, of our sense of identity, then the problem of the Self and the Other will not crop up.’²³ He also explained how Ninasam’s approach and practice embraced this idea:

We have decided that we are committed only to Kannada theatre, Kannada language. At another level, we also want to make plays that are hundreds, even thousands, of years old, our own ... We need Shakespeare, we need the ancient Greeks, and we need the ancient Sanskrit playwrights. We stage Kannada plays, translations of plays from other Indian languages as well as plays from other parts of the world.

... [W]hen we stage ... [Sanskrit plays] ... we feel we can take certain, well considered, liberties with them, including rewriting them. However, we do not do that with playwrights from outside India, for the reason that we want Kannada to grow not in an inward looking manner but to grow outwards, to open out to the world.

We do not want every experience to reach our audiences through characters named Rama or Krishna or Beera. We want a Ferdinando or a Hamlet too to speak to our audiences, and to do [so] as Ferdinando and Hamlet.²⁴

Subbanna held the view that ‘theatre, amongst all the arts, is most potent in showing us the unity of different communities as well as their mutual diversities.’²⁵ As he saw it, modern theatre was the most powerful artistic vehicle for bringing the larger world to Heggodu and for frustrating the formation of a hardened, exclusivist identity. Rigid identity construction, he knew, provided the feeding ground of fundamentalism and Kannada chauvinism, and deprived communities of the elasticity to reinvent themselves and adapt to a changing world.

There is another reason why Subbanna would have thought that modern theatre was better aligned than any other artform to the purpose of expanding the consciousness and discourse of his community and providing it with new points of reference. Apart from their passion for theatre, he said, ‘Our communities tend to regard the “actual reality” of life and the “virtual reality” of theatre as essentially undifferentiated. For them, theatre-reality is as much an integral element of their total consciousness as is everyday routine reality.’²⁶ However,

It is not as though these people consider theatre as a mirror of life. On the other hand, even as they make a practical distinction between the two domains, they regard them both as equally valid kinds of realities. Precisely because of this awareness, they, in shaping their world view, draw their influences and images as freely from one sphere as from the other, finally fusing them together seamlessly. Whenever making abstract formulations, or using points of reference, they quote instances as much from theatre as from real life, investing the former with as much authenticity as the latter is deemed to have.²⁷

Subbanna exemplified this point – that life on stage influenced the thinking and actions of people of the community just as profoundly as life in the world – by narrating an incident from a village performance:

... [T]he Ramayana was being performed. Eventually it came to the point when Rama had to set out for the forest. He said he would go alone, and that Sita should stay back in Ayodhya. She, on the other hand, argued that it was her duty to follow him wherever he went. The argument grew, with both actors presenting their views in the form of improvised lines of dialogue as is typical with folk performances ... Rama seemed to be winning the exchange, since the actor playing his role had better debating skills. Then ... the actor enacting Sita pulled out his last weapon, and said, ‘You may pontificate as much as you wish. Nevertheless, you cannot but take me with you, since in no ‘Ramayana’ that is as yet known does Rama leave Sita behind. You simply have no precedent for doing so.’ Needless to add, that clinched the case.

... When he [the actor playing Sita] found himself losing the dispute at the level of logic, he turned on the strength of precedent which belonged to the sphere of the virtual reality of art. Rama had no option but to concede the point, and bow to precedent.²⁸

What Subbanna did was to ensure that modern theatre came to occupy a pivotal place in the cultural life of Heggodu, vastly expanding the array of virtual realities from which the local people could 'draw their influences and images', and thereby develop a more catholic sense of identity, a sense of belonging to a larger world – a world encompassing the region, state, nation and the globe. It is thus, in critic and commentator Sadanand Menon's words, that 'they emerged as world citizens'²⁹, and as social scientist Shiv Visvanathan has put it, they are citizens who are 'full of a multiplicity of times, full of diverse others as possible selves'.³⁰

However, Subbanna's vision encompassed much more than the questions of identity and belonging. 'He was', as Menon has put it, 'a visionary and a pioneer of a way of being ...'³¹ Subbanna remarked that the idea of community was too flexible to be precisely defined; it referred to an imaginary reality and hence was not available for physical verification.³² What was critical, he felt, was how the idea of community was imbibed in the way one lived one's life and influenced others to live theirs. It was only through one's own example and acts of will that the idea of community in one's inner world could be realised – and that too imperfectly – in the real world.

This thought resonates with Gandhi's exhortation, 'Become the change you want to see!', and Subbanna expressed it most forcefully in an article he wrote in response to the horrific communal riots in the state of Gujarat in 2002. He observed that the minority and majority communities all over India harboured the kind of animosity and prejudices towards each other that was at the root of the violence in Gujarat. There was, in other words, a Gujarat within all of us and it was necessary to:

... first create my Gujarat within my own self, explore it and try to comprehend it, however frightening the process might be. Any cleansing is possible only in this inner sphere ... If I can achieve this, that experience would stir up my will-to-action to an indomitable degree. Such a will would then begin to suffuse my family and my community. It would ... force them to clearly perceive the community-wisdom latent in them and thereby spur them to responsible action. I am not helpless, if I can feel the Gujarat within me ... I can influence and change my own person and my people ...³³

Although Gandhi was one of his sources of inspiration, Subbanna's idea of community was very different from Gandhi's. In the autonomous village republic that Gandhi imagined, prudence, restraint, self-reliance and self-governance were emphasised. It was a community envisioned through

the lens of economics and politics, not culture. Poets were not banished from these village republics, as they were from Plato's Republic, but no essential place was articulated for them. They were, in effect, dispensable. Shiv Visvanathan has pointed out that Subbanna's village was inescapably incomplete. Unlike Gandhi's village, it was not self-contained but 'at home in the world and at home to the world'.³⁴ Nor was it self-sufficient, because 'it needed a continuous flow of storytellers and performers'.³⁵ According to Visvanathan, one can best understand the difference in these two perspectives on community if one considers that language, literature and theatre provided the models for Subbanna's idea of community, not religion, technology or politics. 'Translation emphasises reinvention, rewriting and retelling. It recognises that just as a self needs a surplus of others, no story is complete till it is told in two languages. The translator sustains both similarity and difference. He emphasises in a Godelian sense, the innate incompleteness of any community.'³⁶ Subbanna's theatre, which translated the world for Heggodu, was built on recognising the innate incompleteness of his community.

For communities to see themselves as a fragment, as a part of an unrealised whole, seeking a wider domain of meaning, is a very powerful idea. Such communities are unlikely to fall prey to a pathological notion of their other. As long as communities recognise their essential incompleteness, they will remain open to dialogue and reinvention, to fluid transactions with the world beyond, and will be able to shape a future for themselves as free agents.

Subbanna passed away in 2005. However, Ninasam, which he nurtured for 56 years, continues to prosper and thrive and it is not hard to see its relevance in the contemporary world.

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Endnotes

1. K.V. Subbanna, 'Theatre and community', in N. Manu Chakravarthy, ed., *Community and culture: selected writings by K.V. Subbanna*, Akshara Prakashana, Sagara, 2009, p. 78.
2. S. Deshpande, 'The world was his village', *Frontline*, vol. 22, issue 17, August 13-26, 2005, accessible at <http://www.thehindu.com/fline/fl2217/stories/20050826002910300.htm>.

3. Subbanna has reflected on the question of migration from villages to cities in K.V. Subbanna, 'Gokula Nirgamana: remembrance of idylls past', in N. Manu Chakravarthy, ed., *Community and culture: selected writings by K.V. Subbanna*, pp. 97-112
4. S. Deshpande, 'The world was his village'.
5. 'Ninasam: a cultural alternative', in Rustom Bharucha, *Theatre and the world: essays on performance and politics of culture*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1990, p. 303.
6. 'Theatre at the grass roots: in dialogue with Prasanna and Geeti Sen', in N. Manu Chakravarthy, ed., *Community and culture: selected writings by K.V. Subbanna*, p. 332.
7. *ibid*, p. 333.
8. K.V. Subbanna, 'Theatre and community', p. 61.
9. *ibid*, p. 62.
10. K.V. Subbanna, 'Ninasam: the springs of inspiration', in N. Manu Chakravarthy, ed., *Community and culture: selected writings by K.V. Subbanna*, p. 21.
11. K.V. Subbanna, 'Theatre and Community', p. 59.
12. K.V. Subbanna, 'Ninasam: the springs of inspiration', p. 24.
13. K.V. Subbanna, 'Theatre and community', pp. 47-48.
14. K.V. Subbanna, 'My Kannada Cosmos', in N. Manu Chakravarthy, ed., *Community and culture: selected writings by K.V. Subbanna*, p. 191.
15. 'Theatre at the grass roots: in dialogue with Prasanna and Geeti Sen', p. 340.
16. K.V. Subbanna, 'Ninasam: the springs of inspiration', pp. 26-7.
17. K.V. Subbanna, 'Over the rivers into the seas: speech at the presentation of the Magsaysay Award', in N. Manu Chakravarthy, ed., *Community and culture: selected writings by K.V. Subbanna*, p. 36.
18. On the connection between the ideal of excellence and the emphasis on individual identity and uniqueness, see K.V. Subbanna, 'An obsession with excellence', in N. Manu Chakravarthy, ed., *Community and culture: selected writings by K.V. Subbanna*, pp. 121-130.
19. 'Theatre at the grass roots: in dialogue with Prasanna and Geeti Sen', p. 333.
20. K.V. Subbanna, 'Theatre and community', pp. 65-66.
21. *ibid*, pp. 63-64.
22. 'Theatre at the grass roots: in dialogue with Prasanna and Geeti Sen', pp. 337-38.
23. 'Nation, federation, community: visions of the variegated self in the theatre: an interview with K.V. Subbanna by S. Raghunandana', in N. Manu Chakravarthy, ed., *Community and culture: selected writings by K.V. Subbanna*, p. 375.
24. *ibid*, p. 373.
25. *ibid*, p. 374.
26. K.V. Subbanna, 'Theatre and community', p. 60.

27. *ibid*, p. 60.
28. *ibid*, pp. 60-61.
29. S. Menon, 'Tribute to Subbanna', in N. Manu Chakravarthy, ed., *Community and culture: selected writings by K.V. Subbanna*, p. 392.
30. S. Visvanathan, 'Subbanna's village', in N. Manu Chakravarthy, ed., *Community and culture: selected writings by K.V. Subbanna*, p. 388.
31. S. Menon, 'Tribute to Subbanna', p. 392.
32. K.V. Subbanna, 'Theatre and Community', p. 41.
33. K.V. Subbanna, 'Gujarat soliloquy', in N. Manu Chakravarthy, ed., *Community and culture: selected writings by K.V. Subbanna*, p. 179.
34. S. Visvanathan, 'Subbanna's village', p. 385.
35. *ibid*, p. 383.
36. *ibid*, pp. 383-84.