

THE ROLE OF PALIGARS IN FREEDOM STRUGGLE A HISTORICAL STORY

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Received: 05 Jan 2019

Accepted: 15 Jan 2019

Published: 31 Jan 2019

ABSTRACT

The poligar system was introduced by the Nayaks of Madurai. This system was introduced by the Vijayanagar ruler his Administrative purpose. Here in Tamilnadu this system was implemented by Vijayanagar Nayaks of Madurai under the able guidance of his Thalavay Ariyanayak Madurai. The whole Nayakedom of Madurai was divided into 72 palayams among the 72 palayams the poligar Nerkatten cheval, Pulideva, the poligar of Panchalnkurichi Veerapandya Kattabomman raised their hands against the British. When the palayams came

under the control of the British afer the fall of Nayaks and Nawas of Arcot. Those poligars where treated as the first freedom fighters in Tamil Nadu.

KEYWORDS: *Freedom Fighters, Military Tenure and Extended, Poligars Rendered Military Service to the King*

INTRODUCTION

The word Palaiyam Means military Camp. The poligar System was instituted by Viswanantha Nayak of Madurai. He divided the Tamil country into 72 Palayams and each one was put under a Palayakkar. These palayams were held in military tenure and extended their full cooperation to the need of the Nayaks. The Palayakkars collected the taxes of which one-third of the revenue was given to the Nayak of Madurai, another one-third was spent on the expenditure of the army and the remaining one-third was kept for themselves. The Poligars rendered military service to the king. The English got the authority to collect the revenue from the Palayakkars. The Carnatic Treaty of 1782 gave the British the administration of Poligars. The English forced the Palayakkars to pay the revenue due to them. This provoked the Palayakkars and they rebelled against the British officials.¹

Pulittevar

The Palayakkars who resided towards the west of Tirunelveli was the Maravas and palayakkarars who resided towards the east were the Nayakas. The Marava Palayakkars were under the control of Pulittevar and the Telugu Palayakkars were under the control of Kattabomman of Panchalankuruchi. Pulittevar of Nerkattum seval refused to pay the taxes to the Nawab of Arcot. Therefore Muhammad Ali the Nawab of Arcot permitted the English to collect the taxes. Pulittevar got the support of the Maravas and formed a league. Jagavira Pandya Kattabomman and other Telugu Palayakkars were not in favor

of Pulittevar. Pulittevar sought help of Hyder Ali of Mysore. Hyder Ali was busy in the Mysore wars and he could not help Pulittevar.

The British army under the generalship of Karnal marched towards the south and forced many palaiyams to submit. Pulittevar gave a stiff resistance. Pulittevar made an alliance with the Palayakkars of Uttumalai, Karanthai, Singampatti, Vadakarai, and Urkkadu. Pulittevar was also helped by the Dutch army. So the British army returned to Madras. Yusuf Khan was appointed by the British to wage war against Pulittevar. Pudukkottai and Thanjavur supported the English. The English army under captain Kaled captured Madurai. Pulittevar defeated the combined forces at Nerkkattum seval and Vasudevanallur. In 1760 the English army under Yusuf Khan besieged Nerkkattum seval for three months. Finally, Pulittevar was defeated by Yusuf Khan. Pulittevar revived his strength and managed to reoccupy Nerkkattum seval. But his success did not last long. In 1767, Captain Campbell defeated Pulittevar and the heroic resistance of Pulittevar came to an end.²

Maruthanayagam

Maruthanayagam, also known as Khan Sahib, was a vellala by birth. He was born in Ramnad district. He was converted to Islam and joined as a soldier in the English army,¹² and he fought in the second Carnatic war had a brilliant career in the military service. He became the commander of the British army. He rendered a wonderful service for which he was rewarded with a diamond ring. In 1756 Than Sahib was elevated to the position of governor of Madurai and Tiruchy. He was an able administrator and maintained peace. He encouraged agriculture and weaving industry. He gave importance to the manufacture of gun powder, musket, and cannon, Khan Sahib resumed the temple lands and provided for regular worship in the temples. He improved trade and introduced revolutionary changes within a short period. He reorganized his army on the European model.

Khan Sahib defeated the army of Hyder Ali in 1760. In the next year Than Sahib was successful against Pulittevar and his league. The king of Travancore invaded Tirunelveli. The Travancore army was defeated by Khan Sahib. He concluded a treaty with the king of Travancore without the permission of the English or the Nawab of Arcot. Than Sahib had contacts with the Danish and Dutch companies for supplies. These activities of Khan Sahib created suspicion in the minds of Nawab of Arcot. The Nawab wanted to keep Khan Sahib under his control. Lord Pigot the governor of Madras ordered that Khan Sahib was kept under the control of Nawab of Arcot. Khan Sahib was also directed to pay the revenue to the Nawab instead of the British Company. Khan Sahib refused the order and revolted against the British. He made an alliance with Hyder Ali of Mysore, the French and the local rulers and strengthened his position at Madurai. Muhammad Ali, the Nawab of Arcot, marched towards Madurai and besieged it in 1764. Donald Campbell led the Company's army and attacked Khan Sahib. The latter gave resistance to the English but he was defeated. Khan Sahib was arrested and executed in 1764.³

Kattabomman

(After the fall of the Vijayanagar Empire and the Nayaks of Madurai, the Mughals established their supremacy in South India. The Nawab of Arcot got the right from the Nizam to collect taxes from the Palaiyakars. The Palaiyakars acted

as petty rulers in their respective palaiyams. They collected the revenues from the people. The Nawab of Carnatic was badly indebted to the English East India Company. In 1792 the company signed the Carnatic Treaty with the Nawab and obtained the collection of revenue. The company appointed collectors to collect the revenue from the Palaiyakars. The officials harassed and humiliated the Palaiyakars. Some of the Palaiyakars paid the revenue and some refused and rebelled against the English. Virapandya Kattabomman refused to recognize the authority of the English to collect the revenue. He not only delayed the payment of revenue but also denied to pay.⁴

The ancestors of Kattambomman belonged to Bellary district in Andhra. During the 11th century, Palraj migrated to the Tamil country. His son Bommu was a loyal servant of the Pandya king and Bommu was called 'Kettibommu' since then Kattabomman became the hereditary title of the rulers of the Panchalankurichi Palayam.

Virapandya Kattabomman son of Jagavirapandya Kattabomman was born in 1761. He was the 47th Kattabomman. Virapandya Kattabomman became a poligar in 1790. His wife's name was Jakkammal and his brother name was Umaithurai. Kattabomman paid the taxes regularly and obeyed the company's orders. He identified himself with the anti-British league organized -by Marudu Pandya. He assumed the leadership of the rebel Palayakars of Tirunelveli. He did not pay the taxes in 1798. This provoked col. Maxwell who was in charge of revenue collection. He wanted to put an end to the activities of Kattabomman. Maxwell warned Kattabomman not to join with the Palayakars who were disloyal to the English. Kattabomman had to pay a total amount of 3810 pegodsa.⁵

Colin Jackson collector of Ramnad wrote a letter to Kattabomman asking him to pay the arrears of revenue. But Kattabomman refused to pay the revenue. Jackson wrote another letter to Kattabomman asking Kattabomman to meet him at Ramnad.¹⁵ Kattabomman decided to meet the collector and pay the revenue. He and his brother Umaithurai started with a small army. But Jackson was on tour of Tirunelveli district. Jackson refused to meet Kattabomman at Kutralam. Kattabomman followed Jackson who was passing through Sivagiri, Sattur, and Srivilliputhur for Twenty Three days. Finally, Kattabomman met the collector at Ramnad. Kattabomman was accompanied by his minister Sivasubramania Pillai. Jackson talked with them for three hours by keeping them standing. Jackson tried to arrest Kattabomman but Kattabomman escaped with his brother Umaithurai. Kattabomman's soldiers caused heavy damage to the English. Col Clarke was fatally wounded and the English army arrested Sivasubramania Pillai.

Kattabomman sent a petition to the Council at Madras to enquire into the incident and render justice. Governor Edward Clive released Sivasubramania Pillai from Tiruchirapalli prison and ordered Kattabomman to surrender. Further, Clive appointed a committee and Kattabomman appeared before it. The Committee acquitted Kattabomman. The collector Jackson was replaced by Lushington.

The Palaiyakkars of Nagalapuram, Mannarkottai, Povalli, Kolarpatti, and Sennalkudi join with Kattabomman. The chieftains of Sattur, Kadalkudi, and Kulathur also join the league. Kattabomman also met Marudu Pandya of Sivaganga and made a plan for the conflict with the English. Kattabomman met the Palayagar of Sivagiri and asked him to join the league against the English. Kattabomman met Marudu at Palamaneri on 5th June 1799.⁶ As the British forces were busy in the fourth Mysore war, Kattabomman strengthened his influence. After the final victory in the Fourth Mysore war, the English wanted to reduce Kattabomman and his allies. As Panchalemkuruchi was situated in an open plain Kattabomman wanted

to capture Sivagiri fort which was situated at the foot of Western Ghats. But the poligar of Sivagiri was loyal to the British and paid the tribute to them. Lord Wellesley ordered the English armies at Tiruchi, Thanjavur, and Madurai to march against Panchalamkurichi. Major Bannerman, the English commander sent an envoy Ramalinga mudaliar and ordered Kattabomman to meet him. But Kattabomman did not meet major Bannerman and sent an evasive reply Ramalinga mudaliar exposed the weakness of the Panchalankurichi fort with a wide breach in the wall of the main gate, the fort measuring 500 x 300 was constructed by mud. There were only 1500 soldiers to guard the fort.

The Company's army attacked the South gate and the armies of Ettayapuram and Travancore attacked the north gate of the Panchdamkuruchi fort. The army of Kattabomman defended the Panchamkurichi fort under the leadership of Umaidurai. There was a fierce battle between Kattabomman's army and the British army. The heroism and patriotism of Kattabomman's army prevented the British army from entering the fort. Under the cover of darkness, Kattabomman evacuated the fort and moved to Kadalkudi. More troops came to the rescue of the English. In the final battle at Kallarpati, Kattabomman was defeated. He fled to the jungles of Pudukottai. Umaithurai and his men were defeated. Sivasubramania Pillai was caught and sentenced to death. The Panchalankurichi fort was razed to the ground. The followers of Kattabomman fled and joined the camp of Marudu at Sivaganga.

Vijayaragunatha Tondiman, Raja of Pudukottai sent his army to Kalappur forest in search of Kattabomman. Kattabomman was caught and handed over to the British. When Kattabomman was captured he tried to end his life but the Pudukkottai army prevented him from committing suicide. Major Bannerman conducted a mock trial in the presence of a large number of people. The trials went on for hours together. Kattabomman never admitted his fault and did not regret. Kattabomman was hanged to death at Kayathar on 17.10.1799. Major Bannerman wrote to Madras that Kattabomman walked to the place of execution with a firm determination. He faced the last moments of his life with the pride of a hero. The initial attempt of the Palayakars led by Kattabomman failed. Edward Clive confiscated the palayam of the rebels and established direct administration of the company.⁷

Marudu Pandya

Marudu Pandya was born in 1753 at Mukkulam near Aruppukottai. Palaniappa Servai and Ponnathal were his parents. Marudu Pandya was popularly known as Chinna Marudu and his elder brother was called Periya Marudu or Vella Marudu. Marudu Pandya served under Muthuvaduganatha Thevar of Sivaganga. In 1772 Muthuvaduganatha Thevar was killed by the combined armies of Carnatic Nawab and the British.¹⁸ Marudu Pandya drove the armies and installed Velu Nachiar the daughter of the fallen king. In recognition of his service, Marudu Pandya was appointed as minister of Sivaganga. Deeply moved by patriotism, Marudu decided to liberate the Tamil country from British imperialism. The poligar in the southern districts of Tamil country refused to accept the political supremacy of the British. The leaders of Sivaganga, Ramanathapuram, and Madurai who had a long tradition of independence headed the anti-British alliance it was called the Ramnad league. Marudu took charge of the operations in the Madurai mandalam. He sent a number of envoys to other regions and helped the creation of a peninsular confederacy.⁸

Malappan, Singam Chetty and Muthukaruppadevan accepted the leadership of Marudu Pandya, and he formed the Dindigul league in 1798. He enlisted the cooperation of Gopala Nayak of Virupakshi and Yadul Nayak of Dillid<ottai. Many other Palayakkars join the league. When the fourth Mysore war broke out in 1799, the British withdrew their army from the southern districts of Tamil Ir - Country. The rebels took advantage of this golden opportunity and looted the British godowns and stores at Mudukulathur, Nagalapuram, and Komeri. Gopala Nayak, Malappan and Muthukaruppadevan revolted against the British. The victory of the English in the fourth Mysore war will also give strength to the company, hence the British crushed the revolt immediately.⁹

Marudu Pandya was prepared to face any attack from the British. The Rebels won in the battles of Nattam and Tirupattur. Chinna Marudu captured the fort of Melur and plundered the military stores of the English. Arms and ammunition were hidden in Kalaiyarkoil forests by the rebels. The rebel leaders wanted to consolidate their strength with the support of the people. They Crppealed to the rulers of Pudukottai and Thanjavur not to support to Sivaganga, Dindigal, and Ramnad for getting army and food grains. The rebel leaders rebuilt the fort of Panchalankurchi and made it their base. Sevathaiah became the leader and appealed to the people and Palayakkars. All the Palayakkars except Oothamalai and Ettayapuram supported Sevathaiah.¹⁰

Collin Macaulay attacked Panchalankurichi fort in 31st March 1801. The army of Travancore under Veluthambi helped Macaulay. Macaulay made two attempts to capture the fort of Panchalankurichi. He failed in both the attempts and retreated. General Agnew collected the English forces from Madras, 'Arcot, Thanjavur, Tiruchy, and Dindigul and attacked Panchalankurichi. In the third battle of Panchalankurichi, the British forces stormed the fort and captured it. Umaithurai was severely wounded and fled to Kamudi. He was given a warm welcome by Marudu Pandya.

In 1801 Marudu Pandya issued a proclamation at Tiruchy. A copy of the proclamation was pasted on the gates of Tiruchi fort and -on the walls of Srirangam temple. It appealed to the people and allThe community to fight the imperialist to the finish. Marudu Pandya condemned the supporters of the British as traitors. The purpose of the declaration was to call for unity. Many native chiefs joined the struggle against the British and Marudu was able to collect 20,000 men. "The rebels believed in the mass movement against the British. They appealed to all major castes, the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas, the Sudras, and the Muslims to unite together and free the country from European rule. Further, the people of different castes namely Maravas, Kallars, and Paravas joined the rebellion irrespective of their linguistic or racial considerations".¹¹

The rebels drove away from the enemies from the districts of Ramnad, Madurai, and Thanjavur. But before long the British overpowered the rebels and reestablished their supremacy. The British got the help Thondaiman of Pudukottai and Raja of Thanjavur. But the British attempt to destroy the rebels' settlement in Kalayarkoil ended in disaster. The British deployed many gunboats against the ships of rebels. The destruction of navy and loss of Thondi came as a terrible shock, to the rebels. The English general Macaulay defeated Malappan at Abiramam. In the meantime, the English got the information about the movement of the rebel leaders in Kalayarkoil by employing a spy. The British launched a savage attack on the -rebels. The fall of Kalayarkoil broke the rebel resistance. Marudu hid JIirnsel in the Singampuneri forests. Umaithurai made a last attempt with the support of 4000 soldiers at Virupakshi. He was defeated and captured at Batlakundu. Marudu Pandya made a last attempt but he was defeated at Cholapuram.¹²

The British launched a massive manhunt to capture the rebels. They even announced rewards over the heads of the rebels. Finally, the rebel leaders were captured. Vellamarudu, Chinna Marudu, Sevathambi, and Muthu Karuppan were hanged to death on 24th October 1801 at Tirupathur. Sevathaiah and Umaithurai were impaled on 16th November 1801. Thus a great epoch in the history of Tamil country came to a close. The first organized attempt to defeat the British was defeated. This was due to the support of the local princes to the British and their military strength.

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