



The Poligar System In The Madura Country: A Study On Its Origin And Growth Under Nayaks Period

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Abstract

Viswanatha Nayak, the son of Nagama Nayak, and the founder of the Nayak rule of that region after the fall of the Vijayanagar Empire (1529-1564 A.D.) stretched from Cape Comorin to Valikondapuram on the north and from Coimbatore, Erode, and the Western Ghats Rameswaram and the sea on the east, according to the Mrtyunjaya Manuscripts translated by W. Taylor. He was the first king of Madurai Nayak Kingdom during the 16th century. Viswanatha and his chief general, Ariyanaatha (or Ariyanayaga) Mudali double the offices of commander-in-- chief and prime-minister (Dalavay and Pradhaani) were very efficient administrators and restored order in the country by the institution of the Paalaiyam system of administration as the most practical solution of the difficulties. Viswanatha was trained in the administrative system of the Vijayanagara Empire and made his mark in applying its principles in a systematic manner. The chronicles of the time attribute a larger share of constructive work to Ariyanaatha than even to Visvanaatha, in the matter of the establishment of the Palaiyakar (Poligar) system.

Keywords: Poligar system, Paalaiyam, Madurai, British, Poligars, Nayaks, Visvanatha Nayak, Thirumala Nayak

Introduction

The rise of the Poligars, their living condition and the situation in which they require to be placed and recognised are discussed in this paper. In the discussion of these points it will be useful to take a summary of what appears on the records under the several heads likes William Petrie Esquire observation of Poligars, four fold process of rise of the Poligars, Poligars rise in Nayak period, Nawab period and later Nayak's period, the way Nayaks organized Palayams and Growth and influence of Poligars and objective and Evolution of the Poligars. The aim of this article is to highlight the poligar system in Madurai of Tamil Nadu.

Rise and Growth of Poligar System

When the Emperors of Vijayanagar conquered the country, they needed chiefs, ready to serve than in times of peace and in times of war. They also wanted to accommodate members of princely families, influential chieftains and devoted servants. These considerations led them to the establishment of what is mentioned in the inscriptions, the Nayankara system.¹ The sovereign divided the territory into what were called Nayakattinams and entrusted them with the Nayaks. During the region, Emperor Achyuta Raya from 1529 to 1542 A.D and there were about 200 Nayaks in the Vijayanagar Empire. They formed palayams or Palamus and assigned them with subordinate chieftains known as the Palayakkars or Poligars.²

Marudappa Tevar of Uthumalai traced his descent form a warrior, who was stated to have sprung from the side of goddess Meenakshi with clubs in his hands to assist her in the wars against the rebels of Madurai. Because of his daring exploits during his service under Vadamalayappa Pillayan, the Pandian Governor of Tirunelveli, a rebellion in Tenkasi was suppressed. In return for this service they gained from the Pandyas the possession of Uthumalai. Apadhurhara Tevar at the orders of the Pandyan ruler, ugra Pandya Rajah, routed a Kannada army that advanced to the plains. He founded the authority of his family at Singampatti, given in reward. Kumara Ettappa Nayakkar undertook an expedition to Iramil at the direction of the Pandyan king. He was hit by an arrow from an unknown foe, while he was returning after defeating the enemy. He was granted Kalugumalaians blood money. According to tradition ketti pommur or clever pommur, who founded the Katabomman line of chiefs at Panjalamkurichi, served under the Pandyas and gained from them the possession of that territory in 1584 A.D. In fact when the Nayaks reached Tamilnadu, there had already existed a class of chieftains, who drew their influence from the possession of the territories, which they inherited or acquired.³ The Nayaks chief, after assuming the administration of the Tamil territories, marched to Tirhcirapalli, strengthened its fortification, cleave the jungles on either bank of the Kaveri and suppressed the robber gangs, who found asylum in the area. At his direction his general, Ariyanatha led expedition to Tirunelveli. However the task of consolidation of Nayak authority faced insuperable odds. The chieftains who called themselves as 'pancha pandyas' believed to be the tributaries of the Pandyas, refused to accept any earthly superior. They assembled an army and entrenched themselves at a place referred as Kayathar, ready to fight out the issue. The local tradition at Panchalamkurichi indicates that the Pancha Pandyas took their stand at Kurichi or a valley between two hills and hence the name of that place. Therefore it

is likely that Kayattur or Kayattar situated near Panchalamkurichi. This development threatened to give the signal to the outbreak of a formidable conflagration throughout the country.⁴

The Nayaks associated the Poligars with the administration and delineated their rights and duties. The chronicles indicate that Viswanatha Nayak gave recognition to seventy two palayams and entrusted the defence of each of the seventy two bastions of the fort of Madurai with a particular Poligar. Normally the chieftains gained possession of their districts either through inheritance from the ruling house or by their military might or in recognition of their destined service to the state. The Nayaks permitted these chieftains retain their possession of the same territories or granted them the possessions of other territories. The Poligars were allowed to collect the taxes and required to pay one third of the collections as tribute to the sovereign to maintain such number of troops as could be supported with one third of the revenue and to retain the rest for their private expenses. They were directed to render military service to the sovereign whenever it was demanded and to administer justice to their people. This arrangement, important in itself, accorded legal sanction to the Poligari System rather than creating something new and lesion chieftains as masters of their territories, with fixed rights and they received generous remissions in their payments and grant more villages, in return for their devoted service to the state. The two major objectives of the government were fulfilled at that moment. Firstly, provided for the administration of the Poligar territories and secondly it created a second line of defence, indispensable during this pension anarchy and disorder.⁵

Nagama is said to have declared himself independent, where upon his son, Viswanatha Nayaka, volunteered and succeeded in doing, and was rewarded for his loyalty by being made lieutenant or governor of Madurai in the Vijayanagara Raja's interest. It is not stated that he, like his father, made himself by his own act independent of his master; but the result was not dissimilar, for the power and dignity that had been conferred upon himself personally, as a mark of royal favour, descended to his posterity for fifteen generations. Viswanatha Nayaka seems to have been a man of energy and administrative power. It was by him that Madurai is said to have been fortified. Trichirappalli was also said to have been acquired by him from the king of Tanjore, in exchange for Vallam and incorporated in the Madurai country, in which it continued to be included till the period of the supremacy of the Nawab of Arcot. He also quelled a formidable insurrection in Tirunelveli headed by five confederate chiefs, said to have been brothers, who styled themselves as the five Pandavas.⁶

As the number of Poligars or Palaiyakaras in Tirunelveli are considerable, though not equal to what it is in Madurai (there are at present 22 zemindaries in Tirunelveli and 26 in Madura, including the two very extensive zemindaries of Ramnad and Sivaganga). Caldwell here cite Mr. Nelson's account of the state of things in the Pandya Country generally, which is said to have led to the appointment of Palaiyakaras (Poligars, now zamindars) by Viswanatha Nayaka on his setting himself to the task of pacifying the country.⁷

Whilst the settlement of the southern districts was being effected, Viswanatha found that it was necessary to attempt to provide for the stability of the dynasty of which he hoped to be the founder, by identifying its interest with those of the principal men of the country; and by rendering his rule equally popular with all classes of society. But the task appeared to be one of almost hopeless difficulty. He had brought with him to Madurai crowds of dependents and adherents of his own caste, who had a body which proved themselves to be faithful and obedient and had done his work excellently well. These men were all of them greedily looking for their rewards and unless provided for with lavish liberality would very soon show their teeth. Then there were the old Tamil hereditary chieftains, whom he had found possessed of considerable territories and power.⁸

Lastly, there were the bold and turbulent Telugu and Canarese adventurers, whose ancestors had seized with a strong grip the northern and western division of the country; who paid no man tribute and whose lawless tempers could ill-brook the curb and spur of a strong government. It was Viswanatha's task to reconcile the conflicting interests of all these classes, to smooth away differences and to conciliate affection and to do this in a strange country and with an empty purse, at last he contrived a scheme by which it seemed possible to attain success. Its object was to enrich and ennoble the most powerful of each class, and at the same time secure their and their descendant's allegiance to himself and his successors. This scheme, though possibly as good as any that could at such a time be devised, was nevertheless fraught with all the elements of danger and in the end contributed largely, as we shall see, to the subversion of the Nayaks dynasty.

He was also bound to pay a fixed annual tribute to supply and keep in readiness a quota of troops for the governor's armies; and to keep the governor's peace over a particular tract of country. In consideration of his promise to perform these and other services, a grant was made to him of a tract of country consisting of a certain number of villages, proportioned to his rank and the favour with which Viswanatha and Arya Nayaka respectively regarded him, together with the title of Palaiyakaran or Poligar. In addition to this, each grantee was presented with valuable gifts, titles and privileges were conferred upon him amid much pomp and ceremony, and nothing was omitted which could in any way add to the solemnity and importance of the governor's act. Such was the origin of the famous Madurai Palaiyakaras, of some of whom the descendants are still possessed of their ancestors' feuds, if not of their rank and power.

It appears to the researcher very doubtful whether all the Poligars in Madurai and Tirunelveli were appointed in this manner by one Nayaka ruler alone, whether Viswanatha himself, the supposed founder of the dynasty or any other. The documents on which Mr. Nelson relied seem to possess little or no historical value. All that can be regarded, Caldwell think, as probable is that the existence of the Poligars as a class dates from the period of the commencement of the rule of the Nayakas. Very few of the Zemindars (the principal exception is the Setupati of Ramnad) can claim that their estates or chiefships were conferred upon them prior to the Nayaka period by the old Pandya kings.⁹

The title of Poligars is said by general Wilks to have been given by the Vijayanagara kings (though he does not say by which of them) to the chiefs of the purpose of overawing the original inhabitants. The Tamil name is Palaiyakkara, the literal meaning of which is the holder of a camp, secondly the holder of a barony on military tenure. But the English seem to have taken their name Poligar, not from the Tamil Palaiyakkara, but from the Telugu Palegadu, or the canarese palegara, the meaning of which is identical. (Gadu and gara are equivalent to kara) In English the word Pollam, a Poligar's holding, had taken rather from the Telugu palem, than from the Tamil Palaiyam. The Vijaya-nagara Poligar was held to be a lord over thirty-three villages, but there is no trace of any such rule as to number in the Tamil Country. The Poligar is said to have been originally in the Kannada country called an odayar (proprietor, pronounced wodeyar). The Tamil form of this title is Udaiyar and this is often used by Zemindars in the Tamil Country. Caldwell has found it sometimes in inscriptions included amongst the titles of ancient kings.¹⁰

Mr. Stuart in his Tirunelveli Manual, after quoting the above estimate of the results of the appointment of Poligars by the rulers of Madurai, endeavours to extenuate the evils of the system. He says, "this remark would, however, apply with equal force to feudal institutions in Europe in the Middle Ages and as these served their purpose in the age of the world in which they flourished. It is perhaps reasonable to suppose that protection from foreign foes and internal order and progress, though frequently accompanied by oppression and misrule, were secured by this means to an extent which would have been other wise impossible". It is so seldom that one hears a good word about the Poligars that, the researcher quote these remarks of Mr. Stuart with pleasure. He does not question their misdeeds, but endeavours to extenuate their historical parallel. The misdeeds of the Poligars were more systematic and audacious than those of the feudal nobles of Europe in the middle ages. Even admitting, however, the appropriateness of the parallel, not much seems to be gained by it, for, whether in Europe or in southern India, the "foreign foes" that were most sedulously guarded against were not foreigners, properly so called, but the legitimate rulers of the country, and it was not till the Poligars of the highlands of Scotland and of the Rhine. Like the Poligars of Tirunelveli, had submitted to the dominion of the central government that "internal order and progress" were in any degree secured".¹¹

During the rule of Tirumala Nayaka for some reason which cannot now be discovered, the powerful Poligar of Ettaiyapuram in the Tirunelveli district put himself at the head of a confederation of Poligars and took up arms against the king. The Setupati, the Poligar of Ramnad, being the chief of all Poligars, was entrusted with the duty of quelling the rebellion and performed it most satisfactorily. The leader of the rebels was put to death, and the others severely punished, and in a few months tranquility was completely restored. For this service he was rewarded by the gift of a large slice of land in the neighbourhood of Mannar koil and entrusted with the duty of protecting the pearl fishery, which yielded considerable sums of money to the royal treasury. Another and much higher of official (than the collector of customs) was the administrator or Governor of the Tirunelveli Country. When the king lived in Madurai it was highly necessary to place a man of ability in charge of the southern district and vest him with large powers; and it became still more necessary to do this when Trichirappalli was made the capital.¹²

There is an inscription near Cheranmahadevi in which one Viraravaghava Mudaliar is described as the Karya-kartta, or agent, of Virappa Nayaka in the beginning of the seventeenth century. Tirumalai's younger brother, Kumaramuttu, claimed the right of succeeding to the throne. In virtue, however, of some negotiations he consented to waive his claim and accepted in Lieu of the crown the district of Sivakasi and other territories in the Tirunelveli province.¹³

Later Poligars and Nayaks

The military discomfiture suffered at the hands of the Bahmini Sultanats on the field of Talikota in 1565AD started the steady decline of the Vijayanagar empire. The Nayaks of Madurai and Thanjavur asserted their independence but their endeavour to save the country from disorders proved futile. There came more of external aggressions and internal conflicts. The later rulers of Vijayanagar embarked upon a course of warlike action with an ambition not only to regain the lost ground but also to reassert their waning authority over the provinces. They carried the war to the Tamil country too. Mysore, Madurai and Thanjavur in the mean time entered into a three cornered rivalry for political supremacy. The family records of the Poligars and other chieftains furnish numerous instances for their exploits in support of the Nayaks to check foreign invasions and to make additions to the existing Palayams and to create new ones either to provide for new situations or to accommodate the new chieftains.¹⁴

The number of new Palayams that came into existence under the later Nayaks cannot be ascertained. However the most significant of them were the Marava and Kallar Palayams. The territorial extent and economic resources of these Palayams were so considerable when compared with the ordinary estates, that they were often called as states and their rulers as rajahs.¹⁵

The Nayaks entrusted the administration of Ramanathapuram with two commissioners, but found it impossible either to afford effective protection to the pilgrims going to Rameswaram or to hold the Portuguese under check. Therefore Muthu Krishnappa Nayak (1601-1609) of Madurai decided to be appointed as a chief acceptable to the inhabitants to carry into effect the reorganization of the administration. Raghunatha Setupati at the orders of Tirumala Nayak (1623-1659), fought and repulsed a Muslim invasion and suppressed a rebellion organized by the Poligars or Tirunelveli.¹⁶ As reward for this service, they received the villages near Mannarkovil and a share in the revenue from the pearl fishery at Thoothukudi. However when Chokkanatha Nayak came to power, (1659-1682), Raghunatha Setupati disregarded the central authority and refused co-operation in resisting the Muslim aggression. In retaliation the Nayak troops invaded Ramanathapuram, but could gain no decisive victory. Rani Mangammal sent another expedition, but the Marava forces rounded the Madurai army. In the same year the old Raghunatha Setupati, who was also called Kizhavan declared the

independence of the Marava territory in 1702 AD. The new state of Ramanathapuram extended from the sea in the east within six miles of Madurai in the west and from river Vypay in the south to Thanjavur kingdom in the north.¹⁷

The Marava powers present a striking paradox in the history of the Poligars. To begin with Ramanathapuram was a palayam, constituted by the Nayaks. It paid tribute and rendered military service to Madurai. But when the influence of Ramanathapuram was on the ascendancy the authority of Madurai was on the decline. This enabled the Maravars to establish their independence. Having achieved this, they created new palayams within their territory. If the break away of the territory were a factor in the decline of Madurai the loss of Pudukkottai and Sivaganga was equally a factor in the decline of Ramanathapuram. Despite the assertion of independence, the Nawabs of Arcot when they extended their authority, to the far south, considered the Marava and Kallar powers not as states but only as Palayams.¹⁸

Unlike the ordinary Poligars, the Rajah of Travancore had a dual status. He was the Poligar under the Nayaks of Madurai and subsequently under the Nawabs of Arcot so for his possession of Kanyakumari or Kalakkad was concerned but was a sovereign by himself in regard to his authority over them territories on the west coast. Mohammad Ali claimed the Rajah of Mysore and the king of Jaffna as his Poligars, but he exercised no authority over them. He sought to enlist British support for the enforcement of his claims but with no purpose.¹⁹

Conclusion

The Nayakship of Madurai began as a viceroyalty under Vijayanagar and there was a general tendency to rebel and become free of imperial control. The palayams which were local semi-military divisions were the local agents at the Nayak for keeping local peace as well as to collect revenue on a contract basis. The turbulent chieftain in the Pandyan country who resisted the establishment of the government of Nayaks could be subdued only with the help of the poligars who later in turn took over the role of those turbulent subordinates. The poligar maintained a government of his own and observed those forms and ceremonies which were usually associated with the royal houses and they in general identified their interest with the people of the territory. The company waged a series of wars against the poligars on default of payment or for defence of his authority which created an animosity towards the English. The inhabitants were ill-treated and the chieftains were forced to supply provisions to the forces, give presents to the officials and attend on the revenue servants of the company. Inefficient administration, natural calamities, bribery and corruption crept into the revenue administration and the renters of the company seized their property, plough and utensils, which obliterated the expectations of the inhabitants that they would get any justice from the English. The inhabitants were disillusioned when the English increased the tax burden and they felt that the British were encroaching on their rights and the rebellion spread far and wide. After the suppression of the poligar rebellion, the company took effective measures for the consolidation of its authority in the Madras Presidency.

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