

# EARLY REVOLTS AGAINST THE COLONIAL POWER IN TAMILNADU

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## ABSTRACT

*Between 1799 and 1802 formed one of anti-British outbreaks in Tamilnadu, the growing unrest in Ramanathapuram, Madurai and Tirunelveli culminated in the Poligar uprising of 1799. The victory of the British in the acquisitions and consolidation of their power in Madras strengthened their political power. After defeating the French and their Indian allies in the three Carnatic Wars, the East India Company began to consolidate and extend its power and influence. Poligar war refers to the wars fought between the poligars of former Madurai kingdom in Tamilnadu and the English East India Company forces between March 1799 to May 1802. The Poligars were free to collect revenue, administer the territory, settle disputes and maintain law and order. The Company branded the defiant Poligars as rebels and accused them of trying to disturb the peace and tranquility of the country. PuliThevar wielded much influence over the western Poligars. The Collectors humiliated the Poligars and adopted force to collect the taxes. This was the bone of contention between the English and Kattabomman. In the meantime, Marudhu Pandiyar of Sivagangai formed the South Indian Confederacy of rebels against the British, with the neighbouring Poligars like Gopala Nayak of Dindigul and Yadul Nayak of Aanamalai. Bannerman made a mockery of a trial for Kattabomman in front of the Poligars on 16th October. During the trial Kattabomman bravely admitted all the charges leveled against him. Kattabomman was hanged from a tamarind tree in the old fort of Kayathar, close to Tirunelveli, in front of the fellow Poligars. Despite the suppression of Kattabomman's revolt in 1799, rebellion broke out again in 1800. In the British records it is referred to as the Second Palayakkarar War. It was directed by a confederacy consisting of Marudhu Pandyan of Sivagangai, Gopala Nayak of Dindugal, Kerala Varma of Malabar and Krishnaappa Nayak and Dhoondaji of Mysore. The British finally won after carrying out long and difficult protracted jungle campaigns against the Poligar armies and finally defeated them.*

## Key words

Palayams and Poligars, Divisions of Palayams, Revenue Collection, Revolt of PuliThevar, Kalakadu Battle, Yusuf Khan and PuliThevar, Velunachiyar, Rebellion of VeerapandyaKattabomman, Kattabomman and the Confederacy of Poligars, Rebellion of Marudhu Brothers, Fall of Sivagangai, DheeranChinnamalai

## Introduction

The victory of the British in the acquisitions and consolidation of their power in Madras strengthened their political power. After defeating the French and their Indian allies in the three Carnatic Wars, the East India Company began to consolidate and extend its power and influence. However, local kings and feudal chieftains resisted this. The first resistance to East India Company's territorial aggrandizement was from PuliThevar of Nerkattumseval in the Tirunelveli region. This was followed by other chieftains in the Tamil country such as Velunachiyar, VeerapandyaKattabomman, Marudhu brothers, and DheeranChinnamalai. VeerapandyaKattabomman lifted the banner of local resistance against the British imperialism. Between 1799 and 1802 formed one of anti-British outbreaks in Tamilnadu, the growing unrest in Ramanathapuram, Madurai and Tirunelveliculminated in the Poligar uprising of 1799.

## Palayams and Poligars

Poligar war refers to the wars fought between the poligars of former Madurai kingdom in Tamilnadu and the English EastIndia Company forces between March 1799 to May 1802. The word "Palayam" means a domain, a military camp, or a little kingdom. Poligar in Tamil refers to the holder of a little kingdom as a feudatory to a greater sovereign. Under this system, palayam was given for valuable military services rendered by any individual. This type of Poligars system was in practice during the rule of PratapaRudhra of Warangal in the Kakatiya kingdom. The system was put in place in Tamilnadu by Viswanatha Nayaka, when he became the Nayak ruler of Madurai in 1529, with the support of his minister Ariyanathar. Traditionally there were supposed to be 72 Poligars. The Poligars were free to collect revenue, administer the territory, settle disputes and maintain law and order. Their police duties were known as Padikaval or ArasuKaval. On many occasions the Poligars helped the Nayak rulers to restore the kingdom to them. The personal relationship and an understanding between the King and the Poligars made the system to last for about two hundred years from the Nayaks of Madurai, until the takeover of these territories by the British. VeerapandyaKattabomman, DheeranChinnamalai and Marudubrothers were some of the most notable Poligars who rose up in revolt against the British rule in South India. With a view to suppressing the Poligars, the Company either under the authority of the Nawab or of its own sent frequent expeditions.

## Divisions of Palayams

Among the 72 Poligars, created by the Nayak rulers, there were two blocs, namely the prominent eastern and the western Palayams. The eastern Palayams were Sattur, Nagalapuram, Ettayapuram, and Panchalamkurichi and the prominent western palayams were Uthumalai, Thalavankottai, Naduvakurichi, Singampatti, Seithur. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Poligars dominated the politics of Tamil country. They functioned as independent, sovereign authorities within their respective Palayams.

## Revenue Collection

The Nawab of Arcot had borrowed money from the East India Company to meet the expenses he had incurred during the Carnatic Wars. When his debts exceeded his capacity to pay, the power of collecting the land revenue dues from southern Poligars was given to the East India Company. Claiming that their lands had been handed down to them over sixty generations, many Poligars refused to pay taxes to the Company officials. The Company branded the defiant Poligars as rebels and accused them of trying to disturb the peace and tranquility of the country. This led to conflict between the East India Company and the Palaykkarars which are described below.

## Revolt of Puli Thevar (1755–1767)

In March 1755 Mahfuzkhan (brother of the Nawab of Arcot) was sent with a contingent of the Company army under Colonel Heron to Tirunelveli. Madurai easily fell into their hands. Thereafter Colonel Heron was urged to deal with Puli Thevar as he continued to defy the authority of the Company. Puli Thevar wielded much influence over the western Poligars. For want of cannon and of supplies and pay to soldiers, Colonel Heron abandoned the plan and retired to Madurai. Heron was recalled and dismissed from service.

## Confederacy against the British

Three Pathan officers, Nawab Chanda Sahib's agents, named Mianah, Mudimiah and Nabikhan Kattak commanded the Madurai and Tirunelveli regions. They supported the Tamil Poligars against Arcot Nawab Mohamed Ali. Puli Thevar had established close relationships with them. Puli Thevar also formed a confederacy of the Poligars to fight the British. With the exception of the Poligars of Sivagiri, all other Maravar Palayams supported him. Ettayapuram and Panchalamkurichi also did not join this confederacy. Further, the English succeeded in getting the support of the rajas of Ramanathapuram and Pudukottai.

PuliThevar tried to get the support of Hyder Ali of Mysore and the French. Hyder Ali could not help PuliThevar as he was already locked in a serious conflict with the Marathas.

### **Kalakadu Battle**

The Nawab sent an additional contingent of sepoys to Mahfuzkhan and the reinforced army proceeded to Tirunelveli. Besides the 1000 sepoys of the Company, Mahfuzkhan received 600 more sent by the Nawab. He also had the support of cavalry and foot soldiers from the Carnatic. Before Mahfuzkhan could station his troops near Kalakadu, 2000 soldiers from Travancore joined the forces of PuliThevar. In the battle at Kalakadu, Mahfuzkhan's troops were routed.

### **Yusuf Khan and PuliThevar**

The organized resistance of the Poligars under PuliThevar gave an opportunity to the English to interfere directly in the affairs of Tirunelveli. Aided by the Raja of Travancore, from 1756 to 1763, the Poligars of Tirunelveli led by PuliThevar were in a constant state of rebellion against the Nawab's authority. Yusuf Khan (also known as Khan Sahib or, before his conversion to Islam, Marudhanayagam) who had been sent by the Company was not prepared to attack PuliThevar unless the big guns and ammunition from Tiruchirappalli arrived. As the English were at war with the French, as well as with Hyder Ali and Marathas, the artillery arrived only in September 1760. Yusuf Khan began to batter the Nerkattumseval fort and this attack continued for about two months. On 16th May 1761 PuliThevar's three major forts (Nerkattumseval, Vasudevanallur and Panayur) came under the control of Yusuf Khan. In the meantime, after taking Pondicherry the English had eliminated the French from the picture. As a result of this the unity of Poligars began to break up as French support was not forthcoming. Travancore, Seithur, Uthumalai and Surandai switched their loyalty to the opposite camp. Yusuf Khan who was negotiating with the Poligars, without informing the Company administration, was charged with treachery and hanged in 1764.

### **Defeat of PuliThevar**

After the death of Khan Sahib, PuliThevar returned from exile and recaptured Nerkattumseval in 1764. However, he was defeated by Captain Campbell in 1767. PuliThevar escaped and died in exile. The British finally won after carrying out long and difficult protracted jungle campaigns against the Poligar armies and finally defeated them.

### **Velunachiyar (1730–1796):**

Born in 1730 to the Raja SellamuthuSethupathy of Ramanathapuram, Velunachiyar was the only daughter of this royal family. The king had no male heir. The royal family brought up the princess Velunachiyar, training her in martial arts like *valari*, stickfighting and to wield weapons. She was also adept in horse riding and archery, apart from her proficiency in English, French and Urdu. At the age of 16, Velunachiyar was married to Muthu Vadugar, the Raja of Sivagangai, and had a daughter by name Vellachinachiar. In 1772, the Nawab of Arcot and the Company troops under the command of Lt. Col. Bon Jour stormed the Kalaiyar Kovil Palace. In the ensuing battle Muthu Vadugar was killed. Velunachiyar escaped with her daughter and lived under the protection of Gopala Nayakar at Virupachi near Dindigul for eight years. During her period in hiding, Velunachiyar organised an army and succeeded in securing an alliance with not only Gopala Nayakar but Hyder Ali as well. Dalavay (military chief) Thandavarayanar wrote a letter to Sultan Hyder Ali on behalf of Velunachiyar asking for 5000 infantry and 5000 cavalry to defeat the English. Velunachiyar explained in detail in Urdu all the problems she had with East India Company. She conveyed her strong determination to fight the English. Impressed by her courage, Hyder Ali ordered his Commandant Syed in Dindigul fort to provide the required military assistance. Velunachiyar employed agents for gathering intelligence to find where the British had stored their ammunition. With military assistance from Gopala Nayakar and Hyder Ali she recaptured Sivagangai. She was crowned as Queen with the help of Marudhu brothers. She was the first female ruler or queen to resist the British colonial power in India.

### **Rebellion of Veerapandya Kattabomman (1790-1799)**

Veerapandya Kattabomman became the Palayakkarar of Panchalamkurichi at the age of thirty on the death of his father, Jagavira Pandya Kattabomman. The Company's administrators, James London and Colin Jackson, had considered him a man of peaceful disposition. However, soon several events led to conflicts between Veerapandya Kattabomman and the East India Company. The Nawab, under the provisions of a treaty signed in 1781, had assigned the revenue of the Carnatic to the Company to be entirely under their management and control during the war with Mysore Sultan. One-sixth of the revenue was to be allowed to meet the expenses of Nawab and his family. The Company had thus gained the right to collect taxes from Panchalamkurichi. The Company appointed its Collectors to collect taxes from all the palayams. The Collector humiliated the Poligars and adopted force to collect the taxes. This was the bone of contention between the English and Kattabomman.

## **Conflict with Jackson**

The land revenue arrear from Kattabomman was 3310 pagodas in 1798. Collector Jackson, an arrogant English officer, wanted to send an army to collect the revenue dues but the Madras Government did not give him permission. On 18 August 1798, he ordered Kattabomman to meet him in Ramanathapuram. But Kattabomman's attempts to meet him in between proved futile, as Jackson refused to give him audience both in Courtallam and Srivilliputhur. At last, an interview was granted and Kattabomman met Jackson in Ramanathapuram on 19th September 1798. It is said that Kattabomman had to stand for three hours before the haughty Collector Jackson. Sensing danger, Kattabomman tried to escape, along with his minister Sivasubramanianar. Oomaithurai suddenly entered the fort with his men and helped the escape of Kattabomman. At the gate of the Ramanathapuram fort there was a clash, in which some people including Lieutenant Clarke were killed. Sivasubramanianar was taken prisoner.

## **Appear in the Madras Council**

On his return to Panchalamkurichi, Kattabomman represented to the Madras Council about how he was ill-treated by the collector Jackson. The Council asked Kattabomman to appear before a committee with William Brown, William Oram and John Casamajor as members. Meanwhile, Governor Edward Clive, ordered the release of Sivasubramanianar and the suspension of the Collector Jackson. Kattabomman appeared before the Committee that sat on 15th December 1798 and reported on what transpired in Ramanathapuram. The Committee found Kattabomman was not guilty. Jackson was dismissed from service and a new Collector S.R. Lushington appointed. Kattabomman cleared almost all the revenue arrears leaving only a balance of 1080 pagodas.

## **Kattabomman and the Confederacy of Poligars**

In the meantime, Marudhu Pandiyar of Sivagangai formed the South Indian Confederacy of rebels against the British, with the neighbouring Poligars like Gopala Nayak of Dindigul and Yadul Nayak of Aanamalai. Marudhu Pandiyar acted as its leader. The Tiruchirappalli Proclamation had been made. Kattabomman was interested in this confederacy. Collector Lushington prevented Kattabomman from meeting the Marudhu Brothers. But Marudhu Brothers and Kattabomman jointly decided on a confrontation with the English. Kattabomman tried to influence Sivagiri Poligars, who refused to join. Kattabomman advanced towards Sivagiri.

But the Poligars of Sivagiri was a tributary to the Company. So the Company considered the expedition of Kattabomman as a challenge to their authority. The Company ordered the army to march on to Tirunelveli. In May 1799, Lord Wellesley issued orders from Madras for the advance of forces from Tiruchirappalli, Thanjavur and Madurai to Tirunelveli. Major Bannerman commanded the troops. The Travancore troops too joined the British. On 1st September 1799, an ultimatum was served on Kattabomman to surrender. Kattabomman's "evasive reply" prompted Bannerman to attack his fort. Bannerman moved his entire army to Panchalamkurichi on 5 September. They cut off all the communications to the fort. Bannerman deputed Ramalinganar to convey a message asking Kattabomman to surrender. Kattabomman refused. Ramalinganar gathered all the secrets of the Fort, and on the basis of his report, Bannerman decided the strategy of the operation. In a clash at Kallaratti, Sivasubramanianar was taken a prisoner.

### **Execution of Kattabomman**

Kattabomman escaped to Pudukottai. The British put a prize on his head. Betrayed by the rajas of Ettayapuram and Pudukottai, Kattabomman was finally captured. Sivasubramanianar was executed at Nagalapuram on the 13th September. Bannerman made a mockery of a trial for Kattabomman in front of the Poligars on 16th October. During the trial Kattabomman bravely admitted all the charges leveled against him. Kattabomman was hanged from a tamarind tree in the old fort of Kayathar, close to Tirunelveli, in front of the fellow Poligars. Thus ended the life of the celebrated Poligars of Panchalamkurichi. Many folk ballads on Kattabomman helped keep his memory alive among the people.

### **The Marudhu Brothers**

Periya Marudhu or Vella Marudhu (1748–1801) and his younger brother Chinna Marudhu (1753–1801) were able generals of Muthu Vadugar of Sivagangai. After Muthu Vadugar's death in the Kalaiyarkovil battle, Marudhu brothers assisted in restoring the throne to Velunachiyar. In the last years of the eighteenth century, Marudhu Brothers organised resistance against the British. After the death of Kattabomman, they worked along with his brother Oomathurai. They plundered the granaries of the Nawab and caused damage and destruction to Company troops.

### **Rebellion of Marudhu Brothers (1800–1801)**

Despite the suppression of Kattabomman's revolt in 1799, rebellion broke out again in 1800. In the British records it is referred to as the Second Palayakkar War. It was directed by a confederacy consisting of

Marudhu Pandyan of Sivagangai, Gopala Nayak of Dindugal, Kerala Varma of Malabar and Krishnaappa Nayak and Dhoondaji of Mysore. In April 1800 they meet at Virupachi and decided to organise an uprising against the Company. The uprising, which broke out in Coimbatore in June 1800, soon spread to Ramanathapuram and Madurai. The Company got wind of it and declared war on Krishnaappa Nayak of Mysore, Kerala Varma of Malabar and others. The Palayakars of Coimbatore, Sathyamangalam and Tarapuram were caught and hanged. In February 1801 the two brothers of Kattabomman, Oomathurai and Sevathaiah, escaped from the Palayamkottai prison to Kamudhi, from where Chinna Marudhu took them to Siruvayal his capital. The fort at Panchalamkurichi was reconstructed in record time. The British troops under Colin Macaulay retook the fort in April and the Marudhu brothers sought shelter in Sivagangai. The English demanded that the Marudhu Pandyan hand over the fugitives (Oomathurai and Sevathaiah). But they refused. Colonel Agnew and Colonel Innes marched on Sivagangai. In June 1801 Marudhu Pandyan issued a proclamation of Independence which is called Tiruchirappalli Proclamation.

### **1801 Proclamation**

The Proclamation of 1801 was a nearly call to the Indians to unite against the British, cutting across region, caste, creed and religion. The proclamation was pasted on the walls of the Nawab's palace in Tiruchirappalli fort and on the walls of the Srirangam temple. Many Poligars of Tamil country rallied together to fight against the English. Chinna Marudhu collected nearly 20,000 men to challenge the English army. British reinforcements were rushed from Bengal, Ceylon and Malaya. The rajas of Pudukkottai, Ettayapuram and Thanjavur stood by the British. Divide and rule policy followed by the English split the forces of the Poligars soon.

### **Fall of Sivagangai**

In May 1801, the English attacked the rebels in Thanjavur and Tiruchirappalli. The rebels went to Piranmalai and Kalayarkoil. They were again defeated by the forces of the English. In the end the superior military strength and the able commanders of the English Company prevailed. The rebellion failed and Sivagangai was annexed in 1801. The Marudhu brothers were executed in the Fort of Tirupathur near Ramanathapuram on 24th October 1801. Oomathurai and Sevathaiah were captured and beheaded at Panchalamkurichi on 16th November 1801. Seventy-three rebels were exiled to Penang in Malaya. Though the Poligars fell to the English, their exploits and sacrifices inspired later generations. Thus the rebellion of Marudhu brothers, which is called South Indian Rebellion, is a landmark event in the history of Tamil Nadu.

## The Treaty of Carnatic (1801)

The suppression of the Poligars rebellions of 1799 and 1800–1801 resulted in the liquidation of all the local chieftains of Tamilnadu. Under the terms of the Carnatic Treaty of 31st July 1801, the British assumed direct control over Tamilagam and the Palayakarar system came to an end with the demolition of all forts and disbandment of their army.

## Dheeran Chinnamalai (1756–1805)

Born as Theerthagiri in 1756 in the Mandradiarroyal family of Palayakottai Dheeran was well trained in silambam, archery, horse riding and modern warfare. He was involved in resolving family and land disputes in the Kongu region. As this region was under the control of the Mysore Sultan, tax was collected by Tipu's Diwan Mohammed Ali. Once, when the Diwan was returning to Mysore with the tax money, Theerthagiri blocked his way and confiscated all the tax money. He let Mohammed Ali go by instructing him to tell his Sultan that "Chinnamalai", who is between Sivamalai and Chennimalai, was the one who took away taxes. Thus he gained the name "Dheeran Chinnamalai". The offended Diwan sent a contingent to attack Chinnamalai and both the forces met and fought at the Noyyal riverbed. Chinnamalai emerged victorious. Trained by the French, Dheeran mobilised the Kongu youth in thousands and fought the British together with Tipu. After Tipu's death Dheeran Chinnamalai built a fort and fought the British without leaving the place. Hence the place is called *Odanilai*. He launched guerrilla attacks and evaded capture. Finally the English captured him and his brothers and kept them in prison in Sankagiri.

## Conclusion:

The Poligars went down fighting against alien imperialism. Ultimately a combination of adverse developments rendered their fall inevitable. The Company's ascendancy eclipsed the European and Mysore powers and the Poligars could gain no assistance from any quarter. If the existence of the Poligari system presented certain difficulties to the working of the central government, it equally so presented certain opportunities to the country. The leaders were executed or condemned to ignominious imprisonment and villagers were deprived of the means of repelling the predatory incursion, commanding this period. The repressive policy in consequence prepared the minds of the people for a more determined struggle. The suppression of the Poligar uprising resulted in the liquidation of the influence of the chieftains. Under terms of the Carnatic treaty of 1801, the Company assumed direct control over Madras. The Company mobilised its strength to suppress all rebellious activities and a large number of them were subjected to capital punishment.

It led to the establishment of internal order and peace. The English East India Company assumed full sovereignty over the territories in 1800-1802. The position of the Company was solid and there was a conducive atmosphere for a settlement.

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