

# A Historical Enquiry into the Tragic End of Raja Kesava Das

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**Abstract:** *Raja Kesava Das acted as Dewan under Maharaja Raja Varma (1758-1798) till his death. Kesava Das was certainly a very able and enlightened statesman and he set himself to the task of piloting the State not merely to safety but to glory as well. He found that he had a twofold duty to perform to raise the country and he was looked upon as the only man fit to take up the reins of administration at the critical time. The greatest achievement of Kesava Das was his defense of Travancore against the mighty Tippu Sultan. His treaty of Perpetual Alliance with the Company is another proof of his practical statesmanship. His sudden death cast a gloom over the land. The people were in a state of excitement. They feared that he had been foully disposed of by poison at the instigation of his enemies. In this article an effort has been taken to enquire into the facts about the death of Raja Kesava Das.*

**Key Words:** Raja Kesava Das, Dewan, Travancore

## Introduction:

Raja Kesava Das the Dewan of Travancore (1789-99) and his family rendered signal service to Travancore in a period of great political turmoil and confusion. It was his drive and initiative that enabled to check the Mysorean inroads under Tipu Sultan in order to secure the friendship, alliance and subsidy in 1795. He proved himself statesman. Like the Dewan his family was also dedicated to the service of the country. His brother Kumaran Tampi acted as the supreme commander of the Travancore troops. His nephew Irayimman Tampi who was an able and intelligent young man, was employed as the 'Peishkar'. Parassala Padmanabhan who married the sister of Raja Kesava Das rose to the position of the Dewan of Travancore. But without any regard for their services the whole family was butchered by a hostile faction headed by Samprati Kuncunilan Pillai, The end of the Dewan and his family went so unpleasant.

### Last days of Raja Kesava Das:

Regarding the last days and demise of Raja Kesava Das historians hold conflicting views. According to Shungoony Menon, “Nobody could explain the real cause of the minister’s death. The real cause remained a mystery to him as to many other. He suspected that the Deal fell a victim to the intrigue of a palace coteries headed by Jayantan Sankaran Nambudiri. This view is supported by V. Nagam Aiya and T.K. Velu Pillai in the state manuals compiled by them. The same became the popular view held by the students and scholars of Kerala history. But some of the document that are preserved in the National Archives at Delhi contain reference to the cause of his murder. They give us reliable information about the people who piloted the plot against the life of Raja Kesava Das and his family. It is hoped that the present study based on these records will throw fresh light on the tragic death of the Dewan and several members belonging to his family.

The Dewan seemed as a well-wisher of the English East India Company and had great faith in their growing power. The company in return held him in high esteem. In 1789 they appointed Kesava Das as the first Dean of Travancore During the next one decade he sincerely tried to foster and strengthen the friendship between the company and Travancore. Marquis Wellesley had a very high opinion of him and conferred on him the title of “Raja”. The court of Directors recorded in their minutes that the old Raja is a prudent man attracted to the British connection and was served by a Dewan of “Uncommon ability and worth.

Following the demise of his late master Dharma Raja on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1798, he was deliberately kept away from the new Maharaja by a hostile group headed by Samprati Kuncunilan Pillai and Jayantan Sankaran Nambudri. They were determined to defer the close and cordial relationship between the Dewan and the English. General Kumaran Tampi, the brother of Raja Kesava Das and the supreme commander of the Travancore Forces in his conversation with Murdock Brown, an English private merchant from Mahe revealed that Samprati was “Constantly dinning into the ears of the Rajah that the late Dewan by his dealings and connection with Europeans and particularly the English had ruined the country that all the distresses they felt were entirely owing to him. He confessed the Samprati Pillai charged the late Dewan with jeopardizing the interests of Travancore by his collusion with the English. From the details of the

correspondence carried on by the resident at that time with the supreme Government, the court of Directors inferred that neither the Rajah nor those employed in the transaction of this affairs regarded British connection with the ancient cordiality.

Shungoony Menon and the authors of Travancore state manuals were unanimous in their opinion about the two events which brought about the immediate dismissal of the Dewan. In 1799 the king signed a document ceding Certtala to Cochin under the influence of Jayantan Sankaran Nambudiri without the knowledge of the Dewan. As a responsible minister the Dewan arrested the bearer of the letter on his way to Cochin. He is said to have destroyed that royal sand and protected that part of the land. On another occasion the Nambudiri carried out a grand palanquin of the late king, kept in his sacred memory. The Dewan out of his excessive devotion to his late master severely castigated the Nambudiri for this action. These events quickened the estrangement between the two which finally headed towards a crisis.

### **Death of Raja Kesava Das**

Soon after these events Kesava Das received Vilakkuhithu (a royal writ of retirement) and was immediately put in confinement in his own house. He got no more occasions to exchange views with the company. He was completely barred room acting on behalf of the state. A few days after his confinement, the country was astonished to mourn the death of the Dewan. Thus the primary cause of the dismissal and death of the Dewan was his intimacy with the English East India Company.

Enumerating the great services rendered by the Dewan. Shungoony Menon observed. Thus the old and faithful minister was cut off in the middle of his age and almost within a year of the death of his sovereign master of happy memory. It was very surprising and a mater for painful reflection that such a remarkable personage as Dewan Raja Kesava Das, who had actually saved the country form the grasp of a powerful enemy Tippu Sultan and ensured the permanent security of the country of strengthening the alliance with the Honourable East India company and who had improved it in every respect, was allowed to meet with such a shameful death and that his remains should have been buried like that of an ordinary private individual without any public demonstration of regret of respect. Commenting on the premature end of the Dewan, the court of Directors observed that “the late Dewan so much respected by the people was not suffered to live even in retirement. There is very strong reason to believe that he was taken off by poison.

Col. Macaulay gave the following account. Mr. G. Seytres, a French surgeon who generally attended the Dewan declared on the basis of symptoms that were noticed by those who were present that the unfortunate man died of poison. On his return to the house of a friend after attending a feast in the palace the Dewan complained of pain in the intestines, his tongue became inflamed and his mouth was parched that he called incessantly for drink. He threw himself in the ground beat his head against in agony and died in convulsive torture.

Mr. G. Seytres further stated that he met and spoke to the Brahmin who prepared the poison and this Brahmin confessed having received a sum of 2000 *fanams* to administer of the Dewan. He further expected a beautiful girl in marriage. It was arranged by Jayantan Sankaran Nambudiri who had become the principal minister. It was piloted by Samprati Kuncunilan Pillai. In 1799 Velu Tampi organized an insurrection against the Nambudiri and secured his banishment along with his friends and relatives.

Thus there is clear evidence to believe that the Dewan was poisoned to death. But no attempt seems to have been made by the Travancore Government to find out the perpetrators of this crime. The Maharaja strove intently to suppress the inquiry and manipulate the evidence. The cause for his animosity towards the Dewan was on account of the intimacy existed between the Dewan and the English company. On 8 October 1800 Colonel Macaulay, the Resident of Travancore wrote to the supreme Government of his determination to support the family of the late Dewan for two reasons chiefly a conviction of their being more attached than others to the connection with the company and the probability that gratitude for such support would increase and their attachment. To him the uniform disinterestedness and integrity of the old Dewan appeared extraordinary and hardly credible. His death however removed all incredulity, he left barely sufficient to defray the expenses of his funeral rites.

On 23 July 1800, Col. Macaulay arranged to have a special audience with the king. In the course of the conversation he demanded the immediate trial and punishment of those who had committed so nefarious a murder. He strongly suspected Samprati Kuncunilan Pillai, a person high in the confidence of His highness. He acted as the deputy minister and was ambitious to become the principal minister. He had been educated and brought up by Dewan Raj Kesava Das.

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