KAVAL SYSTEM PAST AND PRESENT WITH REFERENCE TO PERIYAKULAM – A STUDY

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Abstract: Periyakulam is a municipal town situated in present Theni district. Periyakulam is an ancient town with archaeological sites. Kaval system is one of the oldest systems of security that prevailed even during the Sangam Age. The kaval system was classified into Sthala Kaval, Thisai Kaval, Nadu Kaval and Kudi Kaval. In course of time, the Kaval System became an officially approved administrative system during the period of the Madurai Nayaks. The British government took several measures to abolish the kaval system but failed due to operational weaknesses. So the system continued. At present, the Puravu kaval system continues in Periyakulam. Today the cultivable lands are handed over to the Kaval Committee by the farmers' associations of Periyakulam. The Kaval Committee members appoint kavalkarar who watch the farmers' property for which they received a salary in cash or kind. This paper attempts to analyse the Kaval System and its method of operation and the present status of this system with modifications to suit the prevailing social conditions.

Index Terms: Sthala Kaval, Thisai Kaval, Nadu Kaval, Kudi Kaval, Kaval System

I. INTRODUCTION

Periyakulam is a municipal town situated in the present Theni district, 90 kms away from west of Madurai and 15 kms away from north of Theni. The Kaval System in Tamilnadu is one of the oldest practices that were in vogue even in the Sangam Age. Ariyanatha Muthaliar, the Dalawai of Viswananatha Nayak of Madurai divided Madurai region into 72 palayams (smaller administrative units) for effective administration. Periyakulam was one among these 72 palayams. Each palayam was given over to a person considered able and efficient in the palayam. They were called Palayakarars. The British called them Poligar. The palayakarar or the poligar was bestowed the powers to collect revenue, maintain an army for the king and also maintain law and order in the palayams. The Nayaks of Madurai established the Kaval System – a form of security service which was efficient and effective. This paper attempts to bring out the Kaval System past and present with reference to Periyakulam along with its socio-economic background.

II. KAVAL - MEANING

The word Kaval means 'watch'. It is also used to denote the functionary who performs this duty. It was an ancient and indigenous institution that was developed in ancient Tamilnadu. This was a hereditary village police office bestowed with well-defined rights and responsibilities. References are available regarding Kaval system in Sangam literature and in the inscriptions of the Pallavas, Cholas, and the Pandiya kings. The term like Ur Kappar (protector of village) in Purananuru, a Sangam literary text, has the earliest mention of the Kaval System. Nadu Kaval (bigger or wider territory) and Padi (village or land) are the words mentioned in the inscription of ancient kings of Tamilnadu that prove the existence of the Kaval System in Tamilnadu right from the Sangam age. Those who were engaged in this duty were known as Kavalkarar. (a watchman).

III. KINDS OF KAVAL

The Kaval System was mainly classified into Kudi Kaval, Sthala Kaval, Desa Kaval, and Thisai Kaval. Kudi Kaval refers to private watch men employed by the villagers on their own account for the greater safety of their property. Sthala Kaval was guarding a few villages where the Kudi kavalkarar was assisted by the Visarippukaran (enquiry man) and Thalayari (village assistant). The third category was called Desa Kaval. The word Desa means district or country comprising many villages. This institution of Desa Kaval denotes country watch in which a number of villages would be under the control of a chief guard who would be the head of all the kavalkarars of these villages. The fourth category of Kaval System was Thisai Kaval. Thisai Kaval was guarding at a particular direction from where robber gangs would possibly maraud a village.

IV. SUB-SECTS OF KAVAL SYSTEM

Apart from these four general categories of Kaval System, there was a micro unit in the Kaval System. Kondi Kaval (watching the field from cattle) Kondi means untended or stray cattle grazed the crop on other lands and these cattle were apprehended and penned in the Kondi Tholuvam (prison for cattle). A Kondi Tholuvam in Vadakarai near Sourastra Chatram is still intact. Pathai kaval (watching the road for the safe passage of important persons, transport of grains and raw material) and Kovil Kaval (watching temple and its properties).

V. FUNCTIONS OF KAVAL SYSTEM

The primary function of a Kavalkarar whether, Sthala Kavalkarar or Kudi Kavalkarar was to protect the harvest and grains, cattle, crops and other domestic properties of the inhabitants in the villages under their kaval control from thieves and

petty plunderers and to guard the public places like temples, highways, markets, trade fairs, choultries and to keep an eye over the strangers and travelers. If any theft occurred, it was the responsibility of the kavalkarars to trace the culprit and recover the stolen properties, failing which he had to compensate the loss.

Rous Peter, a collector of Madurai reporting about the functioning of kavalkarars to the District Magistrate in 1811 said that "the duties of kavalkarar have always been considered to watch over the crops on the ground to guard them when reaped, and when threshed, the produce is measured in his presence and delivered over to his charge entirely, after which whatever lost is compensated. He is considered accountable for it. To protect the village to which he belongs, and should any of the inhabitants be robbed, he is obliged to make good from his own Maniam or Maniam lands." The value of whatever articles that may have been stolen is his responsibility unless he can deliver up the offenders to justice, and in that case he is absolved from all responsibility.

VI. INVESTIGATION METHOD

The popular method of investigation followed by the Kavalkarars to find out the offenders was tracing and following the footprints of the offenders and locating their whereabouts. In case the footprints of the offenders crossed the border of a particular village or villages, it became the responsibility of the kavalkarars of those villages to trace the offenders. Another method was to pass the information to the fellow kavalkarars of the neighboring villages. By using the kavalkarars network, they were able to monitor the movement of the offenders and locate their hiding places.

VII. CASTE AND KAVAL SYSTEM

Kaval system in Tamil nadu was dominated by some traditionally martial castes such as the Maravars, Naickers, Kallars, Agamudaiyars, Padayachis and Udayars, although the participation of other communities was not unusual. A major section of the above said communities were either serving in the army of local rulers or Poligars as soldiers or were functioning as kavalkarars. There is a reference that a few villages around Sankarankovil looked after Kaval works. Even today they are known as Kaval Paraiyar. In Periyakulam Thenkarai Puravu (region) was dominated by the Agamudaiyars and Padaiyachis. The Kaval responsibility of the Vadakarai Puravu was always in the hands of Kallar. The villagers around Periyakulam were predominantly Kallar who controlled the Kaval. Their families were known as Kaval kudumbam (family of watch).

The Kaval System was popularized during the period of Nayaks of Madurai particularly during the reign of Tirumalai Naick (1623- 1659). The system was uniform in all the 72 palayams established by Ariyanatha Muthaliar, the Dalawai of Viswanantha Nayak (1529 – 1564), Nayak of Madurai. Ramabhadra Naidu Karu was a relation of Kottiya Nagama Nayak, the first Nayak of Madurai and captain of the Vijayanagar forces in Madurai region. When Ramabhadra Naidu was appointed Poligar of Vadakarai palayam he purchased Thottappanayakanur. There after it was called Vadakarai Thottappanayakanur Zamin.

VIII. PRESENT KAVAL SYSTEM IN PERIYKULAM

Puravu Kaval (region) is another form of Thisai kaval popularized during the Tirumalai Naick. This Puravu Kaval system existed in all the palayams. The function of Puravu kaval was well established in Periyakulam in a systematic manner. The river Varaganathi divided Periyakulam into Vadakarai and Thenkarai. During the establishment of Puravu Kaval System there were two Puravus: one is Vadakarai and the other one is Thenkarai

The farmers associations of Vadakarai and Thenkarai today control the Kaval System. The farmers associations have separate committee known as Kaval Committee that consists of 24 members, including a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, 16 executive members and five enquiry committee members. This Kaval Committee has the right to fix the kaval fees.

IX. KAVAL PURAVUS IN PERIYAKULAM

There were two Puravus in Periyakulam one in Vadakarai another one in Thenkarai during the period of Rambhadra Naidu Karu, the Poligar of Periyakulam in 1860. In course of time Vadakarai Puravu was enlarged and then it was divided into Kumbakkarai Puravu and Sukkankal Puravu during the period of Matchi Rambhadra Naidu (1932 -1970) in 1960. The cultivation of land was extended in Vadakarai Melapuravu (West region), Nadu Puravu (middle region) and Keelapuravu (East region) Sukkangal Parai Puravu, Kumbakkarai Puravu and Chelimbu and Murugamalai Puravu respectively.

X. SANCTION OF KAVAL

The Kaval right is sanctioned by the Kaval Committee for every year. The Kaval Committee announces this to the public by the town crier and the beating of drums. The committee receives tender from The Kallar, Agamudaiyar and Padayachi communities only. The Kaval right is granted to those or the person who offers to pay the appropriate fixed amount. In case the tender amount is the same, the committee conducts an election to sanction the Kaval right. Patta holders, tenants and lease holders have the voting right to select the Kaval chief.

XI. KAVAL FEE

The Kaval chief is empowered to collect Kaval fees from the farmers. The Kaval fee is fixed by the Kaval committee on the basis of land or crop. Details of the Kaval fee are printed and circulated to the farmers. The fee was fixed on the basis of kani (75 cents), kuli (60 cents), and acre. The fee was paid either as grain or cash: groundnut and paddy 4 measures, sesame and other grains one measure, tomato, cotton and brinjal Rs.15, sugarcane Rs.40, betel leaves Rs.20, coconut Rs 2 per tree for one year, mango tree Rs 10 per month per acre during non-harvest time, motor and pump set Rs.50 per year and leasing of mango tree 2.5% from the tender amount.

XII. FUNCTION OF PURAVU KAVAL

The Kaval Thalaivar nominated 10 to 15 kavalkars depending upon the area. At every Puravu the Kaval Thalaivar established a check post at its entrance. Farmers and tenants were given tokens for harvest every day morning. Harvested goods

without token might be considered as stolen property and handed over to the Kaval Committee. The Kavalkarar should wear a uniform with his name and the name of the Puravu. This is uniform in all Puravus.

XIII. MARAUDING GROUPS

Periyakulam is a fertile land area where several crops are cultivated. Cultivation of mango is also extensive. In addition to mango, coconut, sugarcane, plantain, paddy, cotton, and silk cotton are also cultivated. The Kallars of Deivandrapuram and the Pariahs of Gandhi Nagar are those who are regularly involved in robbery and theft of agriculture produce in the Vadakarai Puravs. The Pariahs of Kallupatti are said to be the main thieves of the Thenkarai Puravu.

XIV. ENQUIRY SYSTEM

The farmers' association has a separate committee known as the Enquiry Committee that consists of five to seven members to deal with the cases of theft. When a thief is apprehended by the kavalkarars, the culprit is handed over to the enquiry committee. After an enquiry, if the theft is proved, the committee fixes the penalty for the crime. The penalty is usually fixed as one third of the value of the theft. The thief pays immediately or if he is unable to pay so, his relatives should guarantee the payment of the penalty. If and when the thief denies the charge and refuses to pay the fixed penalty, he would then be handed over to the police for legal action.

XV. SOCIO - ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF THE KAVAL SYSTEM

Once in the past working in the Kaval system as a kavalkar was considered as a prestigious employment. The men from the depressed classes were not usually permitted to be employed in the Kaval system because the then upper class people did not want the depressed class people to enter their premises to collect the kaval coolie or Kaval fee. The economic status of kavalkarar also improved much with the income derived from the kaval fee.

At the beginning of 21st century kavalkarar faced difficulties in collecting kaval coolie from the farmers due to the failure of monsoon. So the Kaval System was modified to allow the employment of some depressed classes in the work. However, the Kaval Thalaivar was always a member of the Kallar community. Though a member of the depressed classes now considered this employment as a prestige, he could not go to the houses of the land owners who were from the upper castes and collect Kaval fee. This was done only by the Kaval Thalaivar from the upper caste.

The Kallars of Deivandrapuram, the Pariahs of Gandhi Nagar and Kallupatti which are near Periyakulam were usually involved in the theft. Any thief apprehended by a kavalkarar is beaten to obtain the truth. Today, with the rise of communal tensions, this leads to caste conflicts. This was one of the reasons for the outbreak of caste riot in the southern districts of Tamilnadu, particularly in Periyakulam.

The farmers of the depressed classes of Vadakarai who are involved in agriculture demanded a separate Puravu. As per their demand a separate Puravu was created and is known as Kelapuravu. Here a man from this caste is the Kaval Thalaivar and he appoints kavalkarar from his own community. This kavalkarars today collects his Kaval coolie or Kaval fee at the entrance of their Puravu. Gradually thus members of the depressed classes have gained access into the streets of upper caste people also.

The British government abolished the Kaval System in 1870. So Kudi kaval, Nadu kaval, Sthalakaval and Thisai kaval disappeared gradually. But the British police were unable to check thefts. Therefore farmers decided to revive and continue the Kaval system in the name of Puravu kaval to protect their property. Puravu kaval system in Periyakulam is well established and is still in practice. Puravu kaval system is one of the important institutions of farmers to protect their property.

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