

BRITISH VERSUS AND SUPPRESSION OF POLIGARS IN THE SOUTHERN PROVINCES OF MADRAS, 1799-1801

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ABSTRACT

The Poligars of several palayams withheld the payment of tribute to the Company. The collector assumed power over the defaulted palayams to recover the balance of rent. The arrear of the revenue was collected with the help of Company's sepoys. The Collector in this period frequently requested the government to provide him with Company's sepoys to collect the arrears from the poligars. The Company's administration had to deal with the auxiliary powers of poligars in the southern region. Large tracts of territory in Manaparai, Kallarnadu, Dindigul and Tirunelveli remained under their control. The most prominent of the *pollams* were Sivagiri, Nelkatanseval and Panchalamkurichi in Tirunelveli and Ramnad and Sivaganga in Madurai. In addition to the usual tribute, the chieftains were required to make frequent contributions and presents to the Company. The revenue servants forced them to send eggs, poultry and goats to their houses. 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 and May 1802. The Court of Directors in their dispatch of 5 June 1799 issued an order for the abolition of the military power of the poligars. A major insurrection took place in the southern palayams of Tirunelveli, Dindigul and Sivaganga and shook the authority of the British in 1801. The British took strong measures by mobilizing a powerful army to suppress them; consequently they defeated the rebellious poligars and strengthened their authority. Thus in 1801 the era of war between the poligars and the ruling powers came to an end. After the suppression of the rebellion the savage and violent character of the poligari system was given up and the peaceful and beneficial condition of the zamindaries under the new revenue settlement on the basis of Zamindari system came into being. Thus the Company made itself powerful and was striding forward to becoming the sovereign of the country.

Keywords: Board of Revenue, company, collector, imperialism, palayams, poligars, poligari system, zamindari system

INTRODUCTION

The Company's administration had to deal with the auxiliary powers of poligars in the southern region. Large tracts of territory in Manaparai, Kallarnadu, Dindigul and Tirunelveli remained under their control. They paid tribute to the central authority, yet depending upon the circumstances at times guided by their grievances; they defied the central administration refused payment of tribute. The Company found it essential to suppress the poligars for the consolidation of its power in the southern provinces. The poligars were holders of estates called *pollams* or *palayams* which literally meant an armed camp. A large part of the Carnatic, south of the Kaveri remained under the sway of the poligars. The most prominent of the *pollams* were Sivagiri, Nelkatanseval and Panchalamkurichi in Tirunelveli and Ramnad and Sivaganga in Madurai. In addition to the usual tribute, the chieftains were required to make frequent contributions and presents to the Company. The revenue servants forced them to send eggs, poultry and goats to their houses. The chieftains, on the other-hand, had by tradition cherished a spirit of independence. With their own armed establishments and forts, they resented encroachments upon their rights. The poligars of Madurai were instrumental in establishing administrative reforms by building irrigation projects, forts and religious institutions. Many were hanged and some banished forever to Andaman Islands by the British. Veerapandya Kattabomman, Dheeran Chinnamalai and Marudu brothers 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. 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 and May 1802. The British finally won after carrying out long and difficult protracted jungle campaigns against the poligar armies and finally defeated them. Many lives were lost on both sides. The victory over poligars made large parts of territories of Madras coming under British control enabling them to get a strong hold in India. Accordingly the British suppressed them and transformed them into zamindars and land lords. This marked the eclipse of the poligar system.

RESISTANT AND STRUGGLE BETWEEN COMPANY AND POLIGARS

Between 1799 and 1802 formed one of anti-British outbreaks in the region of Madurai, the growing unrest in Ramanathapuram and Tirunelveli culminated in the poligari uprising of 1799. The stormy political atmosphere and the inefficiency of Nawab's administration contributed to the growth of the influence of the poligars. Nawab granted lands and other concessions to the poligars in return for their assistance. The inhabitants paid taxes to the poligars for protection, usually in proportion to the increase of their duties and of their resources.¹ The existence of military establishments under the control of the poligars and the propensity that they had

displayed in employing them for coercion of the inhabitants and in mutual rivalries presented difficulties to the central authority. The poligars found themselves subjected to frequent humiliation. The poligars, imbued by tradition and a spirit of liberation had left no stone unturned in curbing the British influence. The degradation suffered at the hands of the British and coercion by the Nawab would have awakened the poligars to the new danger threatening them. These drove them to a state of conflict and led to form confederacies against the invading British forces. As the Company appeared much responsible for this situation the poligars cherished a feeling of bitterness against the Company authority.²

A combination of circumstances led the Company into a confrontation with poligars.³ Despite the starvation and mass-exodus, the evil force combined together in oppressing the people. The renters and the assignees increased the prices of articles by common agreement.⁴ Extortion and plunder made the adventure of a merchant enterprising. The stagnation of the petty traffic caused by the withdrawal of carriage-bullocks to be employed with the forces sent against Mysore prevented the importation of grain from northern territories.⁵ William Collins Jackson, the Company's Collector at Ramanathapuram, on the other hand, imposed an arbitrary embargo on the importation of grain through the sea with an intention of providing every artificial attraction to the hoarded grain of the Company. In consequence, the price of grain shot high and the inhabitants found it impossible to obtain any relief. When the Madras Council heard about it, it lifted the embargo; but it was too late.⁶ Jackson's unwise policy no doubt discredited the British administration. As a result, the poligars found it difficult to remit the kist to the Company. The British were not prepared to accept delay or failure on the part of the poligars in regard to remittance.

The discontented people decided to liberate the land from the British domination and to restore the old royal institutions to their former glory. By achieving this, they expected to find the possibility of living in constant happiness without tears. They declared that

If now the people in different countries would rise up and resist, the Europeans will sink and perish. As the people of the different countries are submissive, they desire them to do whatever they like.⁷

The rebellious leaders thus placed their reliance upon force and united action for the attainment of their objective. However, it was the poligars who took the initiative in forming a confederacy of the rebel-chiefs against the Company.⁸ Among them the prominent were the chiefs of Panjalankurichi, Sivaganga and Virupakshi. This confederacy of the rebels, as the Madras Council rightly asserted, "threatened the most injurious consequences to the tranquility and security of the Company's Empire".⁹

In Tirunelveli, the eastern region of Madurai there existed a number of palayams, usually held by the Telugu poligars. Descendants of the ruling class of the Nayaks, they were turbulent by nature and insubordinate by disposition. Among these chieftains the most formidable was Kattabomman of Panjalankurichi. He defaulted payment of tribute to the Company and the arrears amounted to 3,310 pagodas.¹⁰ Jackson, the Collector wrote letters in a language of reprehension and sent his servants to the poligar; yet, these had no desired effect. Thereupon he sought the authority of the Board of Revenue for punishing him in an exemplary manner. But the Board of Revenue did not consider it sagacious to sanction the use of force against Kattabomman, as military preparations against the Mysore were begun and the Madras Council decided to withdraw the forces from the southern provinces. Besides, as Panjalankurichi was situated in sunken plains and cotton ground, it was difficult for the attacking party to get over it in wet weather. Even if the fort was occupied, there was the possibility that Kattabomman, after effecting his escape, would join the camp of fellow poligars and wage an interminable predatory warfare.¹¹ Added to these considerations, it was the desire of the Government to win over the confidence of the poligars through a lenient policy.

However, when the forces of the southern districts were employed against Mysore, Kattabomman organised a league of the poligars of Tirunelveli and Ramnad. These members including the poligars of Nagalapuram, Mannarkottai, Powalli, Kolarpatti, Kadalkudi, Kulattoor and Chennulgudi had already formed themselves into a combination due to the efforts of Marudu of Sivaganga and Melappan of Ramanathapuram and for asserting their right to collect taxes from certain villages in the Company's territory.¹² What Kattabomman proceeded to do was to join this league, and to assume its leadership by virtue of the influence he commanded and resources that he had possessed. Further, he established an alliance with the Kallar Tribes and kindled a commotion in Saptore. He also established close relations with the disaffected chieftains of Ramnad, Sivaganga and Dindigul.¹³ The next attempt of Kattabomman was to take possession of the Fort of Sivagiri. It was situated at a strategic place on the eastern slopes of the Western Ghats and was easy for offensive as well as defensive operations. Veerapandyan sent his forces to assist the rebel son of the poligar of Sivagiri against his father and thereby to establish a hold on that estate. But Sivagiri was a tributary to the Company and hence the Madras Council decided to suppress the rebel powers.¹⁴ Kattabomman sent Pandia Pillai, brother of Sivasubramania Pillai to Madras to gather and transmit intelligence about the British military movements and placed guards at different places to watch the movements of the Europeans and their agents.¹⁵ By the middle of 1799 the Company defeated Tipu Sultan and hence it was found possible to take prompt steps against the rebels. Lord Mornington, the Governor General, was at Madras and he sent troops from Tanjore, Tiruchirappalli and Madurai to Tirunelveli. The Ramnad battalion and Travancore forces also joined the army.¹⁶ Lord Mornington entrusted the command of these forces with Major Bannerman. He granted extensive

powers to him with a view to enabling him to deal with any exigency.¹⁷ However, it was an insult offered by Collector Jackson to Kattabomman of Panjalamkurichi that precipitated the poligar struggle of 1799, perhaps prematurely.

KATTABOMMAN'S CONFLICT WITH COMPANY

Guided by Veerapandiya Kattabomman of Panjalamkurichi organised the poligars of Tirunelveli against the British. In May 1799 Lord Wellesley issued from Madras for the advance of forces from Tiruchirappalli, Tanjore and Madurai to Tirunelveli. The troops of the servile Rajah of Travancore joined the enemy.¹⁸ Major Bannerman, armed with extensive powers for effectively dealing with the poligars, assumed the command of the expedition. Advancing through Ramanathapuram, the army encamped at Tirunelveli. In April 1799 Kattabomman refused the payment of tribute and he made an incursion into the Company's territory of Ramanathapuram.¹⁹ Alarmed at these proceedings, Stephen Rumbold Lushington, Collector of Tirunelveli, summoned the poligar to his presence; but the latter flatly refused.²⁰ The associates of Kattabomman too withheld payments to the Company, made incursions to Ramanathapuram and captured the circar villages.²¹ These hostile activities invited prompt response. Major Bannerman commenced his military operation with the suppression of the rebels of Ramnad. Bennerman, stuck up the heads of the executed insurgents in the villages of Ramnad, as he felt it necessary to terrorize their compatriots.

Thus the English removed the source of grievance to Kattabomman. The verdict of the committee seemed as not unfair and the attitude of the Madras Government appeared not unconciliatory. Marudu Pandyan of Sivaganga in close association with Gopala Nayak of Dindigul and Yadul Nayak of Anamalai was during this period engaged in the organisation of a South Indian Confederacy of rebels against the British with the declared objective of liberating the country from the control of the low wretches as he depicted the English in his Tiruchirappalli Proclamation.²² The rebel missions that he sent to the southern regions visited Panjalamkurichi. In view of the identity of interests this led to the establishment of close association between Kattabomman and Marudu Pandyan. Since then, Veerapandyan held frequent consultations with Marudu. On 1 June 1799 he, attended by 500 men, reached Palamaneri with the intention of proceeding to Sivaganga. But Collector Lushington, considering it as a step taken in contempt of British authority, conveyed his serious apprehension. Therefore the poligar waited at Palamaneri for the arrival of the emissaries of Marudu. On 5 June a party reached the camp and the two groups held deliberations. Subsequently joined by 500 armed men of Sivaganga, Kattabomman returned to Panjalamkurichi.²³ This meeting indicates the importance that the rebel leaders give to mutual consultations.

The son of the poligar of Sivagiri and his advisor Mappila Vennian visited Panjalamkurichi and held consultations in August 1799. Kattabomman decided to establish his influence in Sivagiri with the aid of the son of the poligar, as the ruling chief refused to join the alliance of rebels. Added to this, as Panjalamkurichi, being situated in an open plain, appeared vulnerable to the hostile forces, the possession of an unassailable stronghold was considered an absolute necessity. The strategic location of the fort of Sivagiri at the foot of the Western Ghats was eminently suited both for offensive and defensive operations in the event of any emergency. Major Gramme, Company's army asserted that Kattabommans'

design in marching peons against Sivagiri is to get possession either by force or treachery that fort and a narrow pass which leads to it, difficult of passage, where he hopes to stand his ground against the force which he fears naturally suggest to him to be sent to punish.²⁴

Thus in a bold attempt to strengthen his position an armed column consisting of the followers of Veerapandyan, the son of the poligar of Sivagiri and other allied chiefs, led by Delawa Kumaraswami Nayak, and moved to the west. As the poligar of Sivagiri was a tributary to the Company, the Madras Council considered this expedition as a challenge to its own authority and ordered the army to march to Tirenvelvi.²⁵

After this victory, Bannerman turned against the rebel poligars of Tirunelveli on 1 September 1799, he issued an ultimatum to Kattabomman directing him to attend on him at Palayamkottai on the 4th.²⁶ On receipt of the summons, Veerapandyan professed submission and pleaded that as the date specified was unlucky, he could not obey the order.²⁷ As the reply was evasive, Bannerman led his forces to Panjalamkurichi. Meanwhile, he received reinforcements from Kayattar and Kovilpatti. All the forces were assembled at Panjalamkurichi which was an irregular parallelogram, two sides of which were about 500 feet long and other two sides 300 feet. The wall was constructed entirely of mud and hence it was not so easy for demolition with the cannons. The fort had small square bastions and short curtains.²⁸ The approach of the British troops was so unexpectedly sudden that the poligar found it impossible to assemble all his troops for the defence of the fort. Upon the arrival of the forces, they cut off the communications of the fort.²⁹ A large body of peons rallied from the villages for the defence of the threatened citadel; but were repulsed and driven back with heavy loss. Ramalinga Mudaliar, whom Bannerman deputed to the fort with a message asking for surrender which Kattabomman rejected-gathered the secrets about the vulnerable points in the defences. On the basis of this report, which clearly suggested that Kattabomman anticipated no hostile move, Bannerman decided the strategy of operations.³⁰ He allotted flank companies with a six pounder to blow open the south gate and posted the field pieces to cover the storming party and combined

detachment of the Company, Ettayapuram and Travancore to attack the north face of the fort.³¹ As the signal came, the six pounder began to break the gate. The troops seemed to advance with other and resolution. But the rebels retaliated with determination and threw the attacking columns into disorder. A second attempt was made, but again was repulsed. The rebels under the leadership of Oomathurai, the brother of Kattabomman, put up a stout resistance and frustrated the repeated efforts of Bannerman.³² In a bid to retrieve the termished prestige, the Company ordered for the arrival of more troops from Palayamkottai. As the broken wall appeared vulnerable, the garrison evacuated and the parties took their course towards Kadalkudi. In a clash at Kolarpatti, the fugitives suffered heavy assaults and Sivasubramania Pillai was taken prisoner. The Company forces followed up their victory with the reduction of Nagalapuram and other strongholds of the defiant chiefs to submission.³³ The troops employed by Vijay Raghunatha Tondaiman, Rajah of Pudukkottai, captured Kattabomman from the jungles of Kalapore and handed him over to the Company.³⁴ Upon the fall of the poligar into the hands of the Company his followers fled to Sivaganga and from there to the hills of Dindigul for taking service with Gopala Nayak and other rebel leaders.

However, as the fort appeared indefensible and as the siege continued, the rebels evacuated their stronghold. On 7 September morning the vakeels of Kattabomman waited upon Bannerman with a proposition that he might be permitted to proceed to Fort St. George with his retinue. The purpose of this proposal was not known; perhaps he to surrender directly to Edward Clive. After much discussion on the subject, Bannerman communicated his resolution that if the poligar surrendered himself, he would permit him to proceed to Madras. But Kattabomman declared that it was no assurance against arrest and imprisonment. Hence he broke off the conference and directed his course to Kadalkudi.³⁵ In a battle at Kolarpetti, the Company with the help of the troops of Ettayapuram destroyed many of the rebels. On 9 September the forces occupied Nagalapuram, as the result of which the rebel poligars surrendered one after the other. The forces marched to Kayattar through Koilpatti, with a view to over warming the other poligars. Several poligars surrendered and pledged their loyalty to the Company. Nevertheless, these operations helped the restoration of the order. On 13 September Bannerman executed two of the rebel leaders, Soundara Pandyan at Gopalapuram and Thanapathi Pillai at Nagalapuram.³⁶ Kattabomman who escaped to the jungles of Kalpore was also caught. On 16 October, Veerapandyan was tried before an assembly of poligars, summoned at Kayattar. In an assertive tone and with contempt for death he admitted the charges leveled against him. He declared that he sent his armed men against Sivagiri and that he engaged the British troops in battle at Panjalamkurichi. There upon Bannerman announced death penalty for Veerapandyan. On 17 October, Kattabomman was hanged to death at a conspicuous spot near the old fort of Kayattar.³⁷ These measures of the Company produced the most extensive changes in the affairs of the country. Considering the frequent but futile attempts made so long to reduce the poligars to

submission and to subdue their spirit of independence, they appeared a success. The southern poligars were a race of rude warriors, habituated to arms and independence. But they found that their chieftains were either executed or condemned to imprisonment. The people were disarmed and their forts were razed to the ground.³⁸ As a result it appeared that the Company established its firm control over the land.

SUPPRESSION OF THE POLIGARS

After the suppression of the uprising, Colonel Agnew issued a proclamation which prohibited keeping weapons as an offence. It again stated that a cash award was to be given to those who surrendered their weapons like pikes, gingal, pistol and matchlock to the Government.³⁹ To prevent the poligar insurrection to future, the Government ordered to bring out all the concealed weapons and arms of the poligars and demolish all the forts.⁴⁰ The proclamation of Agnew was published in all parts of Madurai District. Consequently inhabitants surrendered all their offensive weapons to the Government. In this way they disarmed the inhabitants and ensured peace and harmony. It also strengthened the administration by preventing the problem of concealment of weapons in case of an armed rebellion.⁴¹ The suppression of the poligarebellion and South India Rebellion resulted in the liquidation of the influence of the chieftains.

The auxiliary powers were prevented from offering any further serious resistance in defence of their order. The sovereign rights of the Nawab came in the way so long to the implementation of the reforms, but this obstacle too was overcome. The Carnatic Treaty signed on 31 July 1801 ended the Nawab's rule and started the Company administration. Enabled by these changes in its favour, the Company carried into effect the much contemplated political settlement of the poligar country.⁴² Though the English suppressed it by a policy of blood and iron, they did not content themselves with mere suppression. On the other hand, after the conclusion of the Carnatic Treaty of 1801, they proceeded to rectify defects in the administration which contributed to the outbreaks. Edward Clive, Governor of Madras issued a proclamation outlining the different features of the reforms. It granted a general amnesty to all the surviving chieftains, who extended their support to the rebellion and promised to honour the rights of property life, usages and customs of the inhabitants.⁴³ He announced his intention of reorganising the administration of the country on a permanent basis; giving due respect to the traditions of the inhabitants. The Governor declared his decision that a permanent assessment of revenue would be instituted on principles of zamindari tenure so as to give hereditary rights to the poligars. He explained that the permanent assessment would secure to the chieftains possession of their land under the operation of limited and definite laws, which would restrain the servants of the Company from unnecessary interference.⁴⁴ By this proclamation, Lord Clive sought to conciliate the poligars

and the people. Thus the decision to do away with the poligari system was coupled with an attempt to conciliate the wounded feelings of the poligars.

At the same time administration adopted measures for disarming the inhabitants. It directed the people to surrender their fire arms. However, it allowed each chieftain to retain a certain number of peons carrying pikes in order to enable him to maintain those ceremonies of State to which he had been accustomed. Besides, compensation was given for the surrender of fire arms. The forts of the poligars were destroyed and periodical inspection of the *pollams* was instituted so as to prevent reconstruction.⁴⁵ These measures could be carried into effect without any constitutional hurdle as the Nawab's authority was already dismantled.

The struggle was attended with bitter ferocity and immense slaughter. The rebels paid more dearly than the English did, as they were neither disciplined nor adequately armed. Though the rebels had a well concerted plan of action, it did not work up to expectations. In the beginning the rebellion broke out in Tirunelveli, Madurai and Tanjore. Hence the Company found it as an impossible task to crush the rebellion. The proclamations of the rebels indicate that they believed in a mass movement against the Company. They appealed to all major castes-the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas, the Sudras and the Muslims to unite together and free country from European rule.⁴⁶ Further, the people of different castes, Maravas, Nadars, Totiens, Kallars, Paravas, Gounders and Muslims joined the rebellion respective of their linguistic or racial considerations. The Company records of the period refer to the inhabitants of different territories flocking to the rebel ranks quite voluntarily. In addition to these, the *kuravai* which was the war cry of the rebels and the *killah*, a leaf pierced with the nail when sent to the villages, served the purpose of summons to bring the inhabitants to the battlefield.⁴⁷ Still defeat came because of the military strength of the Company, the support of its allied powers and inferior equipments.

After the suppression of the poligar rebellion, the Company took effective measures for the consolidation of its authority. Edward Clive, the Governor of Madras, confiscated the *palayams* of the rebels and established his direct administration. He deprived the poligars of their police and military functions and forced them to destroy all their posts and forts. In consequence they were made mere zamindars. The inhabitants were on pain of death forced to surrender their fire aims, with no compensation; being made and prevented from manufacturing deadly weapons. By these radical measures, the English abolished the poligari system. After a long period of existence it faced with a violent end. After their victory over the peninsular confederacy, organised by the rebels the Company proceeded with the consolidation of their authority over the Madras districts. With this end in view, they reformed the land revenue administration, reorganised the judicial system and promoted communications. The construction of roads

through the woods and provision for quick communication of intelligence were calculated to deny to the rebels the advantages that they derived from jungle warfare and to strengthen the Company's influence.⁴⁸ After the restoration of order, the Company sought to reorganise and improve the administration.

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. The British finally won after a long expensive campaign that took more than a year. The poligar forces based at Panjalankurichi Fort was ploughed up and sowed with salt and castor oil so that it should never again be inhabited. The Company forces quickly overpowered the remaining insurgents. 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. They moved towards the introduction of permanent settlement which converted the poligars into zamindars and entered into an agreement with them which led to the stabilisation of the government. In consequence the Company itself was powerful and was striding forward to becoming the sovereign power. Following, this proceeded with framing the administrative policy giving more importance to revenue to re-organise the system of revenue administration as soon as they established their rule with a view to realising the revenue without much difficulties. They contemplated to replace the existing method of revenue assessment and collection with the new one which was experimented in Bengal. As there existed different modes of revenue assessments, it decided to introduce the Bengal pattern of permanent settlement on zamindari tenure. In this process, the governmental lands were parceled out and sold to the highest bidders.

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