



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

HISTORY

EVOLUTION OF KAVAL SYSTEM IN TRAVANCORE

**KEY WORDS:** Kaval (Police) System, Kavalkaras, Sthalam Kaval, Desa Kaval

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to highlight the evolution of kaval system in Travancore. Travancore was an independent kingdom ruled by the Maharajas during the British period. Later on this kingdom was merged with the modern Kerala State. The word *Kaval* means watch. It was an institution, roughly corresponding to the police of the modern times. This was the primary function of a Marava in the province of Travancore. There were two types of *Kaval*. The *Sthalam Kaval* meaning the 'Village watch' and the *Desa Kaval* means the 'Country watch'. The Marava village leader was their chief. His office was hereditary. The *Kaval* Chief divided the village into several divisions and allotted them to the families of the *Kavalkaras*. The area of operation of the *Kavalkaras* could be changed, if the chief desired it.

INTRODUCTION

Travancore was an independent kingdom ruled by the Maharajas during the British period. Later on this kingdom was merged with the modern Kerala State. The word *Kaval* means watch. It was an institution, roughly corresponding to the police of the modern times. This was the primary function of a Marava in the province of Travancore. There were two types of *Kaval*. The *Sthalam Kaval* meaning the 'Village watch' and the *Desa Kaval* means the 'Country watch'. The Marava village leader was their chief. His office was hereditary. The *Kaval* Chief divided the village into several divisions and allotted them to the families of the *Kavalkaras*. The area of operation of the *Kavalkaras* could be changed, if the chief desired it.

The primary function of a *Kavalkaran* was to protect the grain, cattle and other domestic properties of the inhabitants and to guard the public places like temples, roads and markets. If any robbery occurred, the concerned *Kavalkaran* was held responsible for the recovery of the stolen property, failing which he had to pay damages. It was the responsibility of the *Kaval* Chief to see to it that this was enforced. The *Kaval* chief became the intermediary between the *Kavalkarans* and the people. It was his duty to fix up the amount of compensation in case of theft or loss of property and see to it that the compensation was paid to the person concerned. The chief with the assistance of his subordinate *Kavalkarans* launched an investigation and tried to find out the culprit and recover the stolen article and make the culprit to pay for the loss. In this way the *Kaval* chief assumed police and judicial powers. He and his men employed cruel methods to detect crimes.

The services of the *Kavalkarans* were rewarded by a fee called *Sthalam Kaval fee* which consisted mostly of a portion of the crops that they protected or monetary payment in lieu thereof.<sup>7</sup> The *Kavalkarans* in turn paid a portion of their collection to the *Kaval* chiefs. The *Kaval* dues from the temples were paid to the chief's and they distributed a portion of it to their subordinates. In due course when the Central Government became weak the chiefs misused their powers and became virtually the rulers of the villages. This was possible because they already had both the police and judicial powers with them.

This institution of *Desakaval* denoted 'country watch', A number of villages would be under the control of a leader and he would be the head of the *Kaval* chiefs in those villages. This was also a distinctive institution of the *Maravas* and in principle and practice the details were most akin to that of the *Sthalam Kaval*. The *Desakaval* leader commanded the loyalty of the village *Kaval* leaders who performed police duties. Disputes between villages were settled by the *Desakaval* chief. The decisions and judgments of the chief were implicitly accepted. These leaders received a fee which was also called *Desakaval*.

Like this many references can be cited to show that the Maravas performed *Desakaval* duties also, along side with *Sthalam Kaval*. These references clearly show the number of villages under the leaders and the extent of their area of operation. It seems probable

that when the province of Travancore was convulsed by the struggle of contending interest during the second half of the eighteenth century these leaders extended their sphere of activities. It is said that the *Desakaval* was at its peak between 1720 and 1781 in Travancore.

They maintained armed men to give effective jurisdiction to their office. The Maravas were growing stronger. The institution of *kaval* gave them an opportunity to be united under a leader and the leader became powerful. When the central administration collapsed, the institution of *kaval* attained importance and those leaders virtually became leaders. The country's defence was in their hands. Moreover, they were enjoying certain rights and privileges under their own leaders and to safeguard their interest.

The *Dalawa* was to be agent of the king of Travancore and had jurisdiction over the *kariakkars* territories and the territories directly administered by the government. In the former the *Dalawa's* powers were only of a supervisory characters whereas in the latter he directly ruled on behalf of the king. Therefore, both the Maravas and *kaval* chiefs were under the control of the *Dalawa*. The power of the *Dalawa* was primarily revenue collection; however, he was to exercise judicial and military powers also.

The *Dalawa's* control over the *kavalkar* relate to the collection of tributes due to the king. He did not encroach upon the administrative jurisdiction of the *kaval* chiefs were equally powerful and free to act within their own spheres. In the territory directly under the control of the *Dalawa*, the officers under him collected revenue, but the duty of the maintaining law and order slowly drifted into the hands of the *kaval* chiefs.

The *Dalawa* felt conscious of his powers and was really proud of his strength. The cavalry and troops of the *Kaval* chiefs were allowed to go to their respective Place. The moment he thought of his own independence, he being to tighten the control of the *Kaval* chiefs. The existing practice amount the latter was to refer to any dispute amount themselves to the *Dalawa*, who tried to effect a mediation, and in case he failed would refer the case to the Central Government. But the *Dalawa* had become so self assertive that he not only disposed of the disputes but even took sides in succession disputes. *Dalawa* also in the affairs of the *Kaval* chiefs. However, he was not very successful. The *Dalawa* became arrogant because of his success and he gradually began to rule with pomp and show. Often he was bent to treat the *Karayakkars* with disrespect. He was perpetually trying to curb their independent attitude. The *Dalawa* imposed many restrictions on them. He ordered that every *Kariyakkar* must seek his audience periodically and while entering his court should not wear headdress. Moreover, the *Kariyakkar* were obliged to walk through a moat which had mud instead of water and to prostrate before him to greet him. The *Dalawa* was always seated on a *medal* (high Platform) whenever he received the *Kariyakkar* and chiefs.

The *Kaval* chiefs of the southern region, whom the *Dalawa* called upon to strengthen them to assist him against the kind of

Travancore a few years ago, had by then grown very powerful. They kept increasing their army and cavalry and extended their area of Desakaval.

The Kaval chiefs of Marava were becoming so powerful that they were able to conclude favorable treaties with the portuguese and the Dutch on the weast coast of south Indian. The foreign powers did not venture to antagonize the Marava Kaval Chiefs. Therefore, it may be said that the Maravas gradually emerged as a strong force and because important in Trevancore politics. They were the people who had been traditionally enjoying a limited independence and been free within their territory. Thus the Marava Kaval chiefs were responsible for the establishment of a powerful state of Travancore.

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