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A BRIEF HISTORY OF POLITICAL DIMENSION IN TRAVANCORE UNDER KINGDOM 1729-1956

KEY WORDS: Rama Varma Kulasekara, Ravi Kerala Varma, Marthanda Varma, Ettara Yogam, Sarvadi Karykar, Velu Thampi Dalavai, Rani Gowri Lakshmi Bayi.

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ABSTRACT

Venad was a former feudal state at the tip of the Indian subcontinent, traditionally ruled by the rajas, known as Venattadis. Their capital during the first Sangam age was in Aykudi and later towards the end of the 8th century AD, was at Kollam. A number of kings such as Kodai Kerala Varma, Udaya Marthanda Varma (1175-1195), Vira Rama Kerala Varma, Ravi Kerala Varma, Ravivarma Kulasekhara (1299-1314) and Vira Marthanda Varma ruled over the kingdom. After the 14th century, the Venad rulers gradually intermarried with the Namboothiris, and sometimes with the Nairs, adopting the custom of matrilineal descendency.

INTRODUCTION

Travancore was a former Hindu feudal Kingdom (till 1858) and Indian Princely that had been ruled by the Travancore Royal Family from the capital at Padmanabhapuram or Thiruvananthapuram. The kingdom of Travancore at its zenith comprised most of modern day southern Kerala, Kanyakumari District, and the southern most parts of Tamil Nadu. Though a series of attacks by the resurgent Pandyas between 7th and 8th centuries caused the decline of Ays, the dynasty was powerful till the beginning of the 10th century,¹ when the Ay power diminished, Venad became the southernmost principality of the Second Chera Kingdom.² Invasion of Cholas into Venad caused the destruction of Kollam in 1096. However, the Chera capital, Mahodayapuram, also fell in the subsequent chola attack, which compelled the chera king, Rama Varma Kulasekara, to shift his capital to Kollam.³ The end of Second Chera dynasty in the 12th century marks the independence of the Venad.⁴

In the Second half of the 12th century, two branches of Ay Dynasty, Thrippappur and Chirava, merged in the Venad family. This set up the tradition of designating the ruler of venad as Chirava Moopan and the heriapparent as Thippappur Moopan. While Chirava Moopan had his residence at Kollam, the Thrippappur Moopan resided at his palace in Thiruppappur, 9 miles north of Thiruvananthapuram.⁵

The history of Travancore began with Marthanda Varma, who inherited the kingdom of Thrippappur, and expanded it into Travancore during his reign (1729-1758). He expanded the kingdom of Venad, through a series of military campaigns, from Kanyakumari in the south to the borders of Kochi in the north during his 29 year rule.⁶ He signed a treaty with the British East Indian company and eight feudal land lords called Ettuveetil Pillamar and "Ettara Yogam" who supported the Thampi sons of the previous king of Venad, Rajah Rama Varma. After achieving internal stability in his kingdom, Marthanda Varma set out to conquer the neighbouring kingdoms. In successive battles, Marthanda Varma defeated and absorbed the kingdoms right up to Cochin kingdom including Attingal, Kollam, Kanyakulam, Kottarakara, Kottayam, Pandalam, Poonjar and Chempakassery. He succeeded in defeating the Dutch East India Company during the Travancore Dutch War (1739-1753), the most decisive engagement of which was the Battle of Colachel (10 August 1741) in which the Dutch Admiral Eustachius De Lannony was captured.

Marthanda Varma organised the tax system and constructed many irrigation works in his kingdom. Admiral Eustachius de Lannoy, who was captured as a prisoner of war in the famous Battle of Colachel was appointed as the Senior Admiral and he modernised the Travancore army by introducing firearms and artillery. Ayyappan Marthanda Pillai served as the "Sarvadi Karykar" (Head of the Army). Marthanda Varna introduced titles such as Chempaka Raman and honours such as Ettarayum Koppum to honour the lords and his relatives who had remained faithful to him during his internal problems with the Ettuveetil Pillamar. His able Prime Minister during his entire military career was Ramayyan Dalawa.⁷

The Mysore invasion

Marthanda Varma's successor Karthika Thirunal Rama Varma (1758-1798) who was popularly known as Dharma Raja, shifted the capital in 1795 from Padmanabhapuram to Thiruvananthapuram. Dharma Raja's period is considered as a Golden Age in the history of Travancore. He not only retained the territorial gains of his predecessor Marthanda Varma, but also improved and encouraged social developments. He was greatly assisted by a very efficient administrator, Raja Kesavadas, who was the Diwan of Travancore.⁸

During Dharma Raja's reign, Tipu Sultan, the de facto ruler of Mysore and the son of Hyder Ali attacked Travancore in 1789 as a part of Mysore invasion of Kerala. Dharma Raja had earlier refused to hand over the Hindu political refugees from the Mysore occupation of Malabar, who had been given asylum in Travancore. The Mysore army entered Cochin kingdom from Coimbatore in November 1789 and reached Trichur in December. On December 28, 1789 Tipu Sultan attacked the Nedumkotta from the north, resulting in the Battle of the Nedumkotta (1789). The six thousand strong Travancore army, trained in the European mode of Warfare by Eustachius De Lannoy, held up the French trained war-hardened, fourteen thousand strong army of Tipu Sultan till April 1790, inflicting heavy casualties. Tipu's army finally broke through the Nedumkottah and reached the banks of Periyar river but the floods in Periyar river prevented the Mysorean army from marching further south.⁹ The English East India company now declared war on Mysore Third Anglo-Mysore War in support of Travancore. Finding themselves unable to proceed further and on getting information that British forces were marching on his capital, Tipu and his army retreated back to Mysore. Though the battle of the Nedumkotta was tactically a Mysorean phyrrie victory, strategically, Travancore had won since the Mysorean army could not hold on to their hard won conquests and had to retreat.

Velu Thampi Dalawa's Rebellion

On Dharma Raja's death in 1798, Balarama Varma (1798-1810) took over crown at the age of sixteen. A treaty brought Travancore under the East India Company protection in 1795.¹⁰

The Prime Ministers started taking control of the kingdom beginning with Velu Thampi Dalawa (1799-1809) who was appointed as the Diwan following the dismissal of Jayanthan Sankaran Nampoothiri (1798-1799). Initially, Velu Thampi and the English East India Company got along very well. A section of the Travancore army mutinied in 1805 against Velu Thampi Dalawa and he sought refuge with the British Resident and later used English East India Company troops to crush the mutiny. Velu Thampi also played a key role in renegotiating a new treaty between Travancore and the English East India Company. However, the demands by the East India Company for the payment of compensation for their involvement in the Travancore - Mysore War (1791) on behalf of Travancore, led to tension between the Diwan and the East India Company Resident. Velu Thampi and the diwan of Cochin kingdom, Paliath Achan Govindan Menon, who was unhappy with the Resident for

granting asylum to his enemy Kunhi Krishna Menon, declared war on the East India Company.

The kings of both kingdoms, Travancore and Cochin, did not support the Prime Ministers openly. Initially, the armies of Velu Thampi Dalawa and Paliath Achan Govindan Menon were successful and on December 18, 1808, they stormed the Residents house in Cochin, though the Resident and his friend Kunhi Krishns Menon escaped. The situation changed when an assault on Cochin itself by the rebels on January 19, 1809 was forced back with heavy losses. Col. Leger led an army of the East India Company's soldiers through the Aramboli Ghat and occupied the forts of Udayagiri and Padmanabhapuram of February 19, 1809. Following this development, the maharajah of Travancore, who till then had refused to take any open part in the civil war, turned against his Prime Minister issued an order for his arrest.

The Company defeated forces under Velu Thampi Dalawa at Battles near Nagercoil and Kollam and inflicted heavy casualties on the rebels, following which many of his supporters deserted and went back to their homes. After the mutiny of 1805 against Velu Thampi Dalawa, most of the Nair battalions of Travancore had been disbanded, and after Velu Thambi Dalawa's uprising, almost all the remaining Travancore forces were also disbanded, with the East India Company undertaking to serve the king in cases of external and internal aggression.

Balarama Varma was succeeded by Rani Gowri Lakshmi Bayi in 1810-1815 with the help of the British. When a boy was born to her in 1813, the infant was declared the King, but the Rani continued to rule as the regent. The British Colonel Munro served as her Diwan. On Rani Gowri Lakshmi Bayi's death in 1815, Maharani Gowri Parvathi Bayi followed her as regent.

In Travancore, the caste system was more rigorously enforced than in many other parts of India. The rule of discriminative hierarchical caste order was deeply entrenched in the social system and was supported by the government which had transformed this caste-based social system into a religious institution.¹¹ In such a context, the belief of Ayyavazhi, a part from being a religious system, served also as a reform movement in uplifting the downtrodden section of the society, both socially as well as religiously. The rituals of Ayyavazhi conducted a social discourse. Its beliefs, mode of worship and religious organisation seemed to have enabled the group to negotiate, cope with and resist the relation of authority.¹² The hard tone of Vaikundar towards this was perceived as a revolution against the government.¹³ So the King Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma imprisoned Vaikundar but later released him. In fact, it is notable that, in one way or another after the release of Vaikundar (in 1839-40), the caste-based discrimination by the Kingdom underwent a remarkable change.

The next ruler Maharajah Uthram Thirunal Marthanda Varma A.D 1847-1860, abolished slavery in the Kingdom in 1855, and restrictions on the dress codes of certain in 1859 following the recommendation of the Protestant clergy.¹⁴ His Acts on these social issues won him praise and was copied by the neighbouring State of Cochin. The Maharajah started the postal system in 1857 and a school for girls in 1859. He was succeeded by Ayilyam Thirunal 1860-1880, during whose rule, agriculture, irrigation works and road ways were promoted. Humane code of law were enforced in 1861 and a college was established in 1866. He also built many charity hospitals including a lunatic asylum. The First systematic Census of Travancore was taken on May 18, 1875. He also introduced vaccination in the country. Rama Varma Visakham Thirunal ruled from 1880-1885. He became the first Indian Prince to be offered a seat in the Viceroy's Executive Council and also authored a number of books and essays. He reorganised the police force, and abolished many oppressive taxes.

The reign of Sri Moulam Thirunal Sir Rama Varma 1885-1924 saw the establishment of many colleges and schools. When Jawaharlal Nehru visited the area in the 1920s, he remarked that the education was superior to British India. The medical system was reorganised and Legislative Council, the first of its kind in an Indian state, was established in 1888. The principle of election was

established and women too were allowed to vote.

Sethu Lakshmi Bayi ruled as the regent from 1924-1931. She abolished animal sacrifice and replaced the matrilineal system of inheritance with the patrilineal one. She ended the Deddasi system in Temples.

The last ruler of Travancore was Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma 1931-1947. He made the temple entry proclamation on 12th November 1936, which opened all the shetrams in Travancore to all Hindus, a privilege reserved to only upper caste Hindus till then. This Act won him praise from across India, most notably from Mahatma Gandhi. The first public transport system (Trivandrum - Mavelikkara) and telecommunication system (Trivandrum Palace - Mavelikkara Palace) were launched at the reign of Sri. Chithira Thirunal.¹⁵ He also started the industrialisation of the state. However, his prime minister Sir C.P. Ramaswami Iyer was unpopular among the general public of Travancore. When the British decided to grant independence to India, the minister declared that Travancore would remain as an independent country, based on an "American model". The tension between the local people, led by the Indian National Congress and the Communists, and Sir. C.P. Ramaswami Iyer led to revolts in various places of the country. In one such revolt in Punnapra-Vayalar in 1946, the Communists established their own government in the area. This was crushed by the Travancore army and navy leading to hundreds of deaths. These events led to further disturbances in the State, leading to more killings. The minister issued a statement in June 1947 that Travancore would remain as an independent country instead of joining the Indian Union, and subsequently, an attempt was made on the life of Sir.C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer following which he resigned and fled to Madras, to be succeeded by Sri PGN Unnithan. After these events, Sardar Patel threatened military action against Travancore. The Maharajah, facing both internal agitation and external pressure, complied.

Practice of Mahadanams

The Maharajas of Travancore had been conditionally promoted to Kshatryahood with periodic performance of 16 mahadanams (great gifts in charity) such as Hiranya - garbha, Hiranya - Kamdhenu, Hiranyaswarata, and Tulapurusahadanam in which each of which thousands of Brahmins had been given costly gifts a part from each getting a minimum of 1 kazhanch (78.65 gms) of gold.¹⁶

During 1848, Lord Dalhousie the then Governor general of British India was appraised that the depressed condition of the finances in Travancore was owing to mal-administration and practices of treasury by the ruling elite.¹⁷ Lord Dalhousie, who was indignant at the colossal wasteful expenditure of Travancore state treasury through mahadanams among others, instructed Lord Harris Governor of Madras, warn the Raja under the ninth article of the treaty of 1805.

CONCLUSION

The movement for the unification of the lands where Malayalam was spoken as the mother tongue took concrete shape at the State People's Conference held in Ernakulam in April 1928, and a resolution was passed there in calling for Aikya Kerala. On July 1, 1949, the State of Travancore Cochin was established, with the Maharajah of Travancore as the Rajapramukh of the new State. A number of popular ministries were elected and fell and in 1954, the Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress launched a campaign for the merger of the Tamil speaking regions of Southern Travancore with the neighbouring area of Madras. The agitation took a violent turn and some police and many local people were killed at Marthandam and Puthukkada, irreparably alienating the entire Tamil speaking population from merger into Kerala. Under the State Reorganisation Act of 1956, the four southern taluks of Travancore, namely Thovalai, Agasteeswaram, Kalkulam and Vilavancode and a part of the Chencotta Taluk was merged with Madras state. The State of Kerala came into existence on November 1, 1956 with a Governor, appointed by the President of India, as the head of the State instead of the Maharajah.¹⁸ The Maharajah was stripped of all his ranks and Privileges according to

the twenty sixth amendment of the Indian constitution Act of July 31, 1971.

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