



HISTORY UNIT 6

EARLY REVOLTS AGAINST BRITISH RULE IN TAMILNADU

Dear students,

Today we are going to discuss about Early revolts against British rule in Tamil Nadu.

Introduction

- After defeating the French and their Indian allies in the three Carnatic Wars, the East India Company began to consolidate and extend its power and influence.
- However, local kings and feudal chieftains resisted this. The first resistance to East India Company's territorial aggrandisement was from Puli Thevar of Nerkattumseval in the Tirunelveli region.
- This was followed by other chieftains in the Tamil country such as Velunachiyar, Veerapandiya Kattabomman, the Marudhu brothers, and Dheeran Chinnamalai. Known as the Palayakkarars Wars, the culmination of which was Vellore Revolt of 1806, this early resistance to British rule in Tamilnadu is dealt with in this lesson.

Resistance of Regional Powers against the British

(a) Palayams and Palayakkarars

- The word "palayam" means a domain, a military camp, or a little kingdom.
- Palayakkarars (Poligar is how the British referred to them) in Tamil refers to the holder of a little kingdom as a feudatory to a greater sovereign.
- Under this system, palayam was given for valuable military services rendered by any individual.
- This type of Palayakkarars system was in practice during the rule of Pratapa Rudra of Warangal in the Kakatiya kingdom.
- The system was put in place in Tamilnadu by Viswanatha Nayaka, when he became the Nayak ruler of Madurai in 1529, with the support of his minister Ariyanathar.
- Traditionally there were supposed to be 72 Palayakkarars. The Palayakkarars were free to collect revenue, administer the territory, settle disputes and maintain law and order.
- Their police duties were known as Padikaval or Arasu Kaval. On many occasions the Palayakkarars helped the Nayak rulers to restore the kingdom to them.
- The personal relationship and an understanding between the King and the Palayakkarars made the system to last for about two hundred years from the Nayaks of Madurai, until the takeover of these territories by the British.

Eastern and Western Palayams



- Among the 72 Palayakkarars, created by the Nayak rulers, there were two blocs, namely the prominent eastern and the western Palayams.
- The eastern Palayams were Sattur, Nagalapuram, Ettayapuram, and Panchalamkurichi and the prominent western palayams were Uthumalai, Thalavankottai, Naduvakurichi, Singampatti, Seithur.

Palayakkarars' Revolt 1755-1801

(a) Revolt of Puli Thevar 1755–1767



Puli Thevar

- In March 1755 Mahfuzkhan (brother of the Nawab of Arcot) was sent with a contingent of the Company army under Colonel Heron to Tirunelveli. Madurai easily fell into their hands. Thereafter Colonel Heron was urged to deal with Puli Thevar as he continued to defy the authority of the Company.
- Puli Thevar wielded much influence over the western palyakkarars. For want of cannon and of supplies and pay to soldiers, Colonel Heron abandoned the plan and retired to Madurai. Heron was recalled and dismissed from service.

Confederacy and Alliance with Enemies of the British

- Three Pathan officers, Nawab Chanda Sahib's agents, named Mianah, Mudimiah and Nabikhan Kattak commanded the Madurai and Tirunelveli regions.
- They supported the Tamil playakkarars against Arcot Nawab Mohamed Ali. Puli Thevar had established close relationships with them.
- Puli Thevar also formed a confederacy of the Palayakkars to fight the British. With the exception of the Palayakkarars of Sivagiri, all other Maravar Palayams supported him. Ettayapuram and Panchalamkurichi also did not join this confederacy.
- Further, the English succeeded Puli Thevar in getting the support of the rajas of Ramanathapuram and Pudukottai. Puli Thevar tried to get the support of Hyder Ali of Mysore and the French.
- Hyder Ali could not help Puli Thevar as he was already locked in a serious conflict with the Marathas.



Kalakadu Battle

- The Nawab sent an additional contingent of sepoys to Mahfuzkhan and the reinforced army proceeded to Tirunelveli. Besides the 1000 sepoys of the Company, Mahfuzkhan received 600 more sent by the Nawab.
- He also had the support of cavalry and foot soldiers from the Carnatic.
- Before Mahfuzkhan could station his troops near Kalakadu, 2000 soldiers from Travancore joined the forces of Puli Thevar. In the battle at Kalakadu, Mahfuzkhan's troops were routed. Yusuf Khan and Puli Thevar
- The organized resistance of the palayakkarars under Puli Thevar gave an opportunity to the English to interfere directly in the affairs of Tirunelveli.
- Aided by the Raja of Travancore, from 1756 to 1763, the palyakkarars of Tirunelveli led by Puli Thevar were in a constant state of rebellion against the Nawab's authority.
- Yusuf Khan (also known as Khan Sahib or, before his conversion to Islam, Marudhanayagam) who had been sent by the Company was not prepared to attack Puli Thevar unless the big guns and ammunition from Tiruchirappalli arrived.
- As the English were at war with the French, as well as with Hyder Ali and Marathas, the artillery arrived only in September 1760.
- Yusuf Khan began to batter the Nerkattumseval fort and this attack continued for about two months.
- On 16 May 1761 Puli Thevar's three major forts (Nerkattumseval, Vasudevanallur and Panayur) came under the control of Yusuf Khan. In the meantime, after taking Pondicherry the English had eliminated the French from the picture.
- As a result of this the unity of palyakkarars began to break up as French support was not forthcoming. Travancore, Seithur, Uthumalai and Surandai switched their loyalty to the opposite camp.
- Yusuf Khan who was negotiating with the palayakkarars, without informing the Company administration, was charged with treachery and hanged in 1764.

Fall of Puli Thevar

- After the death of Khan Sahib, Puli Thevar returned from exile and recaptured Nerkattumseval in 1764.
- However, he was defeated by Captain Campbell in 1767. Puli Thevar escaped and died in exile.

(b) Velunachiyar (1730–1796)



Velunachiyar

- Born in 1730 to the Raja Sellamuthu Sethupathy of Ramanathapuram, Velunachiyar was the only daughter of this royal family.
- The king had no male heir. The royal family brought up the princess Velunachiyar, training her in martial arts like valari, stick fighting and to wield weapons.
- She was also adept in horse riding and archery, apart from her proficiency in English, French and Urdu.
- At the age of 16, Velunachiyar was married to Muthu Vadugar, the Raja of Sivagangai, and had a daughter by name Vellachinachiar.
- In 1772, the Nawab of Arcot and the Company troops under the command of Lt. Col. Bon Jour stormed the Kalaiyar Kovil Palace.
- In the ensuing battle Muthu Vadugar was killed. Velunachiyar escaped with her daughter and lived under the protection of Gopala Nayak at Virupachi near Dindigul for eight years.
- During her period in hiding, Velunachiyar organised an army and succeeded in securing an alliance with not only Gopala Nayakar but Hyder Ali as well.
- Dalavay (military chief) Thandavarayanar wrote a letter to Sultan Hyder Ali on behalf of Velunachiyar asking for 5000 infantry and 5000 cavalry to defeat the English.
- Velunachiyar explained in detail in Urdu all the problems she had with East India Company. She conveyed her strong determination to fight the English.
- Impressed by her courage, Hyder Ali ordered his Commandant Syed in Dindigul fort to provide the required military assistance.
- Velunachiyar employed agents for gathering intelligence to find where the British had stored their ammunition.
- With military assistance from Gopala Nayak and Hyder Ali she recaptured Sivagangai.
- She was crowned as Queen with the help of Marudhu brothers. She was the first female ruler or queen to resist the British colonial power in India.