

COMPANY'S REVENUE SETTLEMENT AND POLIGARS UPRISING IN MADURAI REGION, 1791-1801

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By the British, various diplomatic steps were taken to establish their power in Madurai. In 1801, Madurai passed into the hands of the British from the Nawabs of Arcot by the treaty of Carnatic. While Muslims captured Madurai by their muscle power, the British used not only their gun power; but also diplomacy and treachery. Thus the Afghans, Vijayanagar Emperors, Nayaks, Arcot Nawabs and finally the British emerged as Masters of Madurai by force. Since 1750s, the British were involved in the affairs of the Nawab of Carnatic and supported his cause in the Carnatic Wars by providing men and materials. When the British realized the fertility of Madurai and Tirunelveli Regions, they wanted to establish their authority.

Assumption of Revenue Administration of Madurai

In Tamilnadu, the British annexed Madurai in a phased manner. The Dindigul Region was captured from Tipu Sultan during the Third Mysore War in 1790 and formally ceded in 1792. The revenue administration of Madurai was assumed significance due to the conclusion of the Carnatic Treaty with the Nawab of Arcot in 1801.¹ The Poligars of Dindigul were rebellious chiefs who disobeyed to the authority of the British. Taking advantage of the change of rule, they became restless. The early British Collectors frequently undertook military action to bring them under control. The Poligars formed formidable alliance against the British and organized resistance to the British authority. The insurrections of Poligars were suppressed and the British consolidated their authority over the region of Madurai.² This facilitated the British to introduce new revenue system based upon the Bengal version of Permanent Revenue Settlement under Zamindari Tenure. Revenue Settlement in the Poligar and Sircar Territories on the acquisition of Dindigul, the Madurai region consisted partly of the sircar territory and partly of the territory under the hereditary military chiefs known as Poligars. The Poligars were allowed to remit a fixed amount as the payment of *peshcush* (tribute) or revenue to government annually. They were left to collect the public dues from the ryots in their respective Pollams according to the established usage of the country until the introduction of a new system of revenue administration.³

On 1 September 1790, Alexander Macleod was appointed as the Collector of Dindigul. He forwarded the account of Poligars to the Board of Revenue stating that most of them were unjustly dispossessed of their Pollams by Tipu Sultan. The British conquest restored them their traditional rights and privileges. However, the Poligars took advantage of the change in Government, seized some lands and claimed other neighbouring Pollams.

The British forces moved against the rebellious Poligars who possessed numerous armed peons. After firm action, they were ready to come to terms with the Collector for settlement.⁴ The Collector was obliged to transact business with them. On 19 January 1791, the Collector again complained of the refractory conduct of Poligars and appealed for military help. Consequently the troops were despatched to maintain the Collector's authority in February 1791. With the help of the powerful troops, the Collector was able to bring the Poligars under control and entered into agreement with them. Subsequently he reported the completion of the settlement with the Poligars to the Board of Revenue.⁵

Thus the Poligars had to come to Collector's camp once a year for settlement of the government dues and each promised the Collector to pay some reasonable amount of tribute considering the seasons and crops. Macleod, the Collector, also adopted the system of renting out *sircar* territory. For this purpose, the *sircar* territory was divided into six revenue units like Todikombu, Periyakulam, Vattilagundu, Andipatti, Uthamapalayam and Cumbum for annual revenue settlement either to renters or to village headmen.⁶ The revenue from the *sircar* revenue units were collected through renters when they acquired the area. One village or one region was given to the renters. The British Collector delivered a *cowle* (patta) to the village headman of each village which took *muchilika* (written engagement) from him and fixed the period for the payment of governmental share. It became the responsibility of the village headman to pay the amount.⁷ The Collector farmed out the villages to renters either individually or in groups through tenders. The renters, however, freely levied exorbitant rates and resorted to oppression. It was almost impossible for the oppressed to seek redressal for their grievances. The assessment was payable either in kind or in cash. Thus the primitive mode of collecting revenue continued for several years.⁸

The Poligars Conflicts with Company

The Poligars of several Pollams withheld the payment of tribute to the British. The Collector took over the defaulted Pollams to recover the balance of rent. The arrears of revenue were collected with the help of British sepoy. In this period, the Collector frequently requested the Madras Government to provide him with companies of sepoy to collect the arrears of revenue from the Poligars. In the whole of Dindigul Region, confusion and chaos prevailed. Cumbum and Gudalur were claimed by the King of Travancore.⁹ Poligar Copia Nayak of Sandiyoor plundered the *sircar* territory and compelled the people to refuse payment to the British Authority. According to the order of the Board of Revenue, the Collector proceeded to Sandiyur, accompanied by a detachment, in June 1795. The Pollam was sequestered and the Poligar fled to the hill. The Poligar of Devadanapatti assisted Sandiyur Poligar in his rebellious activities. The Collector considered him as the enemy of the British.¹⁰ The Poligar of Bodinayakkanur prevented the entry of the Collector when he moved towards the gates of the fort by employing his armed peons; but the British sepoy acted swiftly and opened fire as a defensive measure. The Poligar of Vadagari sent 400 armed men to assist the Bodinayakkanur Poligar. The Board of Revenue directed the

Collector to apprehend him and enquire about his conduct. It authorized the Collector to apply military force, if necessary.¹¹ There was a boundary dispute between the Poligars of Ayagoody and Virupakshi. There was lawlessness during that period. As the situation became uncontrollable, the Collector published a notification in 1795 directing the Poligar of Dindigul to disband all his armed followers. If the Poligar failed to obey the orders of the Collector, it was to be considered as an act of defiance to the British and in which case, the Collector was empowered to take military action against such refractory conduct.¹²

Thus it is clear that after the British assumption, the whole Madurai region was constantly in disorder for about six years. The Poligars withheld payment of their dues. The renters followed their example. The collection of revenue dwindled to the lowest ebb. In 1796, the Government appointed a Commission, consisting of William Harrington and William Macleod, to enquire into the cause of the disorder. The earlier Collectors did little to establish order in the region.¹³ The Commission reported that the District fell a prey to the political confusion and its revenue administration was defective in nature. The *karnams* and *amuldars* combined together to produce false accounts. The renters bullied their tenants. The Poligars went about with armed bands and annoyed the *ryots* in *sircar* lands. After completing the report, the Commission handed over the District to Thomas Bowyer Hurdis, the new Collector in 1796. For some years, he was fully occupied with the suppression of the unruly Poligars.¹⁴

Suppressed the Poligars by British

In 1797, Lord Hobart, the Governor of Madras, suggested a method of rendering the Poligars useful subjects and obedient tributaries to the British Government. The Court of Directors, in their despatch of June 5, 1799, issued orders for the absolute suppression of the military power of the Poligars. In the meantime, the Poligars of Tirunelveli organized insurrection against the British; but they were suppressed through military action.¹⁵ The dissatisfied Southern Poligars were influenced by Marudu brothers of Sivagangai and Gopala Nayak, the Poligar of Virupakshi. They despatched secret emissaries to the discontented Poligars who were organizing against the Authority of the British. They intrigued to bring all the discontented Poligars under one common objective of ousting the British from the South.¹⁶

The confiscated Poligars gained strength by equipping their people with matchlock and pike. The Poligars of Virupakshi, Kannivadi and Devadanampatti were close relatives. They not only possessed armed strength; but also influenced other Poligars to be rebellious. The Collector requested the Madras Government to provide him with a powerful army to frustrate their attempt to overthrow the British Government.¹⁷ The discontented Poligars of Dindigul and Tirunelveli and other chiefs of the South formed a Confederacy at Virupakshi near Dindigul in 1800 and decided to carry out simultaneous. They, thus, planned for a general insurrection over the entire Southern Peninsular India. The Collector directed the troops to march to Virupakshi to establish order since the Confederation of Poligars had declared war against the British. The Collector proposed to punish those Poligars who

misbehaved continuously against the Authority of the British in spite of repeated warnings. Consequently the Government promulgated an order in Virupakshi, which banned the use of fire arms and other weapons in the Pollam of Virupakshi.¹⁸ In the Dindigul Region alone there were 14,280 armed peons employed by different Poligars for the purpose of their defense. Among them, 4090 were engaged on occasional pay and 10,190 were employed against *pun jay maniyam*. Besides, all those who lived in the pollams were loyal to the Poligars. When the Poligars called upon the cultivators for defensive purpose, everyone was ready to do so with match locks, pikes and other offensive weapons to execute their orders. Their military and independent spirit led them to revolt against the British. The latter employed military force to suppress the armed strength of the Poligars. As the first step, the Collector punished Poojari Nayak of Devadanampatti for his rebellious conduct as a warning to other Poligars under his authority.¹⁹

In 1801, a major insurrection took place in the Southern Pollams of Tirunelveli, Dindigul and Sivagangai. It challenged the Authority of the British. The British mobilized a powerful army to suppress them. The British defeated the rebellious Poligars and strengthened their authority. The British systematically assaulted their strongholds and suppressed them in all places in Tirunelveli and Sivagangai. The rebels under Oomathurai and Sevathiah of Panjalankurichi fled to Dindigul.²⁰ Col. Agnew of the British Army who sent a detachment under Col. Innes and launched offensive operation against the rebels. This well-organized attack resulted in the suppression of the rebellion and the leaders were arrested by the victorious British Army. The turbulent Poligars were compelled to obey the Authority of the Government. Gopala Nayaka, the Poligar of Virupakshi, was constantly engaged in revolt against the government. He was responsible for the Confederacy of Poligars during the rebellion of 1800-1801. Hence the British captured him, along with his son Muthuvallamanayakkan and both were executed in November 1801.²¹ Among the twenty six pollams in Dindigul, Palani, Eriyadu and Virupakshi were sequestered and the Poligars were punished. Rettiambadi, Marunuttu and Devadanampatti were eschewed for want of legal heir. Leading Poligars and other adherents, who were captured in Dindigul during the South Indian Rebellion of 1801, were subsequently tried before a tribunal and finally sentenced to death for their rebellious behaviour against the British. After a confinement of several years, Lakshmi Nayaka, the Chief of Dindigul and four principal adherents were executed at Virupakshi March 26, 1805. On the next day, in Palani, three other prisoners were sentenced to death. A proclamation was read out in these two Pollams, explaining the fate of the people who took up arms against the Government. Those who took part in the rebellion received a general amnesty on condition that they should remain faithful to the British.²²

When the Government discovered that forts and military peons of the Poligars posed a hazard to public peace and order, the Collectors were instructed to destroy the forts and disband the armed peons. In December 1801, after the suppression of the rebellion, Col. Agnew who issued a proclamation which declared possessing weapons as an offence. It again stated that cash award was to be given to those who surrendered their weapons like

pikes, pistols and matchlocks to the Government. The Government ordered the unearthing of all concealed weapons of the Poligars, demolition of all the forts as a measure to prevent Poligar insurrections in future. The proclamation of Col. Agnew which was published in all parts of Madurai. Consequently the inhabitants surrendered all their offensive weapons to the Government. In this way, the British disarmed the inhabitants in order to ensure peace. At the same time, it strengthened the administration to prevent the problem of concealment of weapons in case of an armed rebellion.²³

End of Rebellion and Obedient of Zamindars

After the suppression of the rebellion, the ferocious and turbulent character of the Poligars was transformed. They became peaceful and beneficial agents of the British under the new revenue settlement based on the Zamindari System. Thus in 1801, the era of struggle between the Poligars and the ruling British came to an end. Since the Poligars retained their special influence and authority in their Pollams, the British found it convenient to entrust the collection of revenue with them. Since the Poligars feared the deprivation of their power, the Government proceeded to implement a new revenue settlement in order to pacify the Poligars.²⁴ With this end in view, the Madras Government issued a proclamation, applicable to the Poligars of Tirunelveli, Madurai, Sivagangai and Dindigul, to disarm the regions and to abolish the military service on 1 December 1801. At the same time, the proclamation also declared Permanent Revenue Settlement and converted the Poligars into Zamindars of their ancestral Pollams. The Poligari Pollams became Zamindari Estates under the changed circumstances. It was the solemn pledge of the Government to permanently assess Pollams as Zamindaris.²⁵ The proclamation was followed by the assessment of land in the Pollams and amount fixed by the Government was considered as the permanent *peshcush* payable to the Government. The military service was given up and money payment was encouraged. Their armed peons were converted into revenue servants.²⁶

However, the Poligars were saved from humiliation by conferring on them the new status of Zamindars under the Permanent Revenue Settlement. The suppression of the Poligars enabled the British to strengthen their Authority in Madurai Region. The British mobilized their strength to suppress all rebellious Poligars. A number of Poligars lost their Pollams for their rebellious activities and a large number of them were severely punished. It led to the establishment of internal order and peace. Their forts were destroyed and their armed peons were disbanded. The position of the British was consolidated. The introduction of Permanent Settlement converted the Poligars into Zamindaris and the British entered into agreement with them. Thus the British emerged powerful and established their paramourty in the erstwhile Madurai Region.

End Notes

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