

KATTABOMMAN'S RESISTANCE AGAINST BRITISH RULE IN PANJALANKURICHI REVOLT OF TIRUNELVELI

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In this paper tries to represent how the little kingdoms which particularly Kattabomman, the poligar of Panjalankurichi, fought for his authority against the Company in Panjalankurichi Revolt. On the whole there is a triangular view of the contest between the little kingdoms, the Nawab and the Company. The present chapter takes the case of the little kingdoms and analyses the contest for power and legitimacy of the little kingdoms and brings out the circumstances and various wars led by the *Palaiyakkarars* highlighting particularly Kattabomman. Here the discussion is about Kattabomman, the *Palaiyakkarar* of Panjalankurichi a leading figure in the first war of rebellion held there against the Company, real power holder of the Carnatic. He continued his fight valiantly against the Company power. The chapter ends with the narration of events surrounding the death of Kattabomman in 1799.

Panchalankurichi of Kattabomman

Legend has it that during a hunting trip into the forests of Salikulam (close to Azhagiya Pandiyapuram) one of the Kattabommans watched the spectacle of a hare chasing seven hounds. Kattabomman was amazed at this miracle. Believing that the land possessed great powers that could instill courage in people, he built his fort there and named it Panchalankurichi. On 2 February 1790, Veerapandiyar, became the king of Panchalankurichi at the age of 30 as Veera Pandia Kattabomman supposed to be the 47th ruler of the region and the 5th ruler from the Kattabomman clan and a Palyakarrar (or Polygar) of the Madurai Nayak kingdom.¹

Rise of Revolt

Two important battles occurred between the *Palaiyakkarar* of Panjalankurichi and the Company. This part of the paper concentrates on the first war led by Kattabomman. The enmity rose up while the *Palaiyakkarar* refused to pay the tribute to the Company.² When Bannerman reached the fort of Panjalankurichi, Lieut. Dallas with his men and horses immediately surrounded the fort. He sent his interpreter Ramalinga Mudaliar to Kattabomman for compromise, as he wanted to avoid war. Kattabomman was allowed to answer within half an hour's time to consider whether he would submit and surrender.³ In the meantime, Ramalinga Mudaliar collected all the secrets of the fort. Kattabomman replied that if the Company would provide *cowle* or other security to him, he would come for a personal conference in four hours time. Bannerman sent a messenger for peace talk and

demanded that Kattabomman should surrender without any condition.⁴ Kattabomman replied that for a warrior honour is more precious than life. To surrender would mean losing his honour and he would rather lose his life than his honour. Kattabomman also stated as following:

As long as the throat does with life pulsate,
Victorious shall ever be the clan of ...

Bannerman, rejecting the terms, ordered the assault to begin at once.⁵ On 5 September 1799, Bannerman arrived at Panjalankurichi and attempted to take the fort the same day by storm, without waiting for the arrival of the European portion of his force. His reason for not waiting for the arrival of the Europeans was that he was afraid the *Palaiyakkarar* would endeavor to make his escape during the night and get away across the country to Sivagiri.

Major Bannerman commanded the force to surround the fort. Nevertheless they started to fight with the Panjalankurichi men. The sound of cannons and weapons clashing with other weapons hit the sky. Although Kattabomman did not have a proper force and superior technological weapons as the Company had, he encouraged his soldiers and fought bravely. The Company did not expect this resistance from Kattabomman.⁶

The force of Kattabomman is portrayed as follows:⁷

“A force of one thousand and five hundred men,
Marched forward at a steady pace.
A phalanx of five hundred followed
Led by the wielder of a spear
And a million marched ahead
Followed by the honoured chief,
Under the ceremonial canopy”

Company attack the fort

The Company's army attacked the fort suddenly and cut off all the communications to the fort. The native forces which came to the spot were prevented at various centres. Some of them were driven back with heavy loss. As the army found it very difficult to capture the fort it ordered for more troops. On 6 September 1799 Bannerman was joined at Panjalankurichi by the troops that were stationed at Kovilpatti and Kayathar. The European contingent and the two 12-pounders were ordered to Kayathar. Lieutenant Dallas, without a moment's delay, and with much judgment, surrounded the fort with his cavalry and his parties were supported with every possible expedition by infantry.⁸ In the same day, more troops arrived from Palayamkottai. The army used cannon to destroy the mud fort. In the encounter 600 troops were killed. Nearly 1050 men died on the spot on the side of the Panjalankurichi. With the well trained soldiers, the troops started to attack first in the south side of the fort. At the same time an attack on the north face of the fort was made by two companies of sepoy's regulated by Lieutenant Dallas. The attempt was persevered in so long

as there was a shadow of success.⁹ The north side of the fort was destroyed by cannon attack. When the Company's force tried to enter the gateway, they were stopped and killed by two brave warriors, Vellayathevan and Sundaralingam, the generals of Kattabomman. On the side of the Company, Assistant General Collins was killed by Vellayathevan. At the end of the revolt both sides suffered severe loss. Vellayathevan and Sundaralingam were killed in the battle. Panjalankurichi fort was captured by the Company's force.¹⁰

Kattabomman versus the Company

Oomathurai, Duraisingam and Sivasubramanya Pillay, after discussing the situation felt that the Company's force would eventually capture the fort and so urged Kattabomman to leave the fort. As the Company's forces possessed modern weapons and arms, Kattabomman who lacked arms and weapons could not contest them continuously. On the suggestion of Sivasubramanya Pillay, Kattabomman and his followers decided to escape from Panjalankurichi for the present and return to it later with reinforcements with the support of other *Palaiyakkarars*, to deal with Company's troops. The *Palaiyakkarar* and his supporters did not wait for the recommencement of the attack on the fort but left for Kolvarpatti. Kattabomman left the fort with 50 soldiers and his brothers. When the fort was captured, nobody was there. The *Palaiyakkarar* of Ettaiyapuram was asked by Bannerman to locate Kattabomman and his followers. When the *Palaiyakkarar* of Ettaiyapuram attacked Kolvarpatti, Kattabomman effected his escape and sought refuge first at Sivagangai and then at Pudukottai.¹¹

The first revolt came to an end when Kattabomman was captured shortly thereafter by one of the military chiefs of a loyal ally of the Company, Vijayaragunatha Tondaiman of Pudukkottai where the former took shelter with his brother.¹² Major Bannerman put forward a number of charges against Kattabomman and his followers. Major Bannerman filed a case against Kattabomman which included the following charges:¹³

- (i) He sent an armed force of between 700 and 1,000 *peons* under the command of one of his own relations to join the Sivagiri *Palaiyakkarar's* son, Mappillay Vanniyan, who was in open rebellion against his father, plundered many villages and committed many losses.
- (ii) When he was in his fort of Panjalankurichi on the morning of the 5 September 1799 he did receive summons to wait upon Bannerman at a small distance from his fort, which he refused to obey. And that he did remain in his fort during that day, and was present while his people fired upon and killed many of the Company's troops, who were ordered to compel his submission to the authority of government.
- (iii) He was irregular in the payment and arrears of revenue.

Capture and Hanged of Kattabomman

Thus Major Bannerman put forward charges against Kattabomman and his followers. After an informal trial, all of them were awarded with capital punishment. Kattabomman alone was sent to Kayathar where the Company's force was garrisoned. On the morning of 16 October 1799, at 10 o' clock, Kattabomman was hanged after formal enquiry in the presence of all the *Palaiyakkarars*. Those who resisted the Company were punished and their *Palayams* were divided and given as reward to those who supported the Company. Oomaithurai and Duraisingam were jailed in Palayamkottai.¹⁴ The historical fort was razed to the ground and the *Palaiyakkarars* were ordered not to carry weapons or build forts in their *Palayams*. As a result of the first revolt, the Madras government ordered the disarming of the *Palaiyakkarars* and the demolition of the forts of the *Palaiyakkarars* who sided with Kattabomman.¹⁵

Kattabomman's minister, Sivasubramanya Pillay was arrested and taken to Bannerman, who had proceeded to Nagalapuram. He was hanged and his head sent to Panjalankurichi. At the same time Saundara Pandiya Nayak, the brother of the *Palaiyakkarar* of Nagalapuram, who had headed his brother's plundering and murdering expeditions into Ramnad country, was hanged at Gopalpuram. Perumal Nayak, the *Palaiyakkarar* of Kadalgudi having rebelled against the Company was expelled from his *Palayam* and his lands were sequestered to the Company. Likewise, Lingama Nayak and Annajee Nayak, *Palaiyakkarar* of Kulathur were imprisoned and executed later.¹⁶ Bannerman was commissioned by the Company to make enquiry into the misconduct of the Tirunelveli *Palaiyakkarars* in communication with the Collector, and punish the disloyal *Palaiyakkarars*. The *Palaiyakkarars* of Panjalankurichi, Nagalapuram, Elayirampennai, Kolvarpatti, Kadalgudi and Kulathur were dispossessed of their *Palayams*. The Company assumed the charge of the inhabitants of the *Palayams*. Oomaithurai was accepted unanimously as the *Palaiyakkarar* of Panjalankurichi and he took the oath to revenge the Company's government. With the great support of the people, he rebuilt the fort once again in the same place within six days. He also got defeated along with Marudhu Brothers in 1801.¹⁷

The Company did not forget to reward those *Palaiyakkarars* that remained loyal, especially those that were near neighbours to Panjalankurichi. The *Palaiyakkarar* of Maniyatchi and Melmandai, whose refusal to join the rebellion brought down the rebels into fall. Both these *Palaiyakkarars* were liberally rewarded for their service and they were presented of a portion of the lands of the deposed *Palaiyakkarars* of Kadalgudi and Kulathur. The Ettaiyapuram *Palaiyakkarar* already been liberally rewarded by a gift of four out of the six *maganams* into which the forfeited estate had been divided.¹⁸

Bannerman realized during the *Palaiyakkarar* revolt that as long as the *Palaiyakkarars* were allowed to hold their forts their position was safe. So he decided to order that all the forts in the aforesaid *Palayams* being deemed useless and unnecessary by the Company were to be destroyed. The Company government ordered the disarming of the *Palaiyakkarars*. It was strictly prohibited that no peon, *sheroigar*, *kavalkaran*, inhabitant or any other person of any description whatever should thereafter use or keep firelock, matchlock, pike, or spear,

under pain of being put to death.¹⁹ Any person whatever found concealing or possessing them would be also subject to the same punishment. Bannerman appointed from among the inhabitants of each village informers to collect information regarding those who carried arms. Every inhabitant that made not the fullest enquiry, and gave not the speediest information of all arms concealed in his village was held subject to severe punishment.²⁰ Unfortunately *Palaiyakkarars* did not follow a clear cut policy nor made a united stand and they fought against each other and weakened themselves and eventually a combination of adverse developments rendered their fall inevitable. In 1750s Pulithevan the *Palaiyakkarar* of Nerkattansevval was defeated by the joint forces of the Nawab and the Company. In 1781, the Nawab of Arcot assigned the revenues of the Southern Tamil Country to the Company, whose officers then under took the internal administration of affairs. In 1782, the strongholds of Chokkampatti and Panjalankurichi were reduced by Colonel Fullerton, who also reduced other refractory *Palaiyakkarars*. This was followed by a rebellion in 1799 against the Company, the dominant authority in the south India. After the war was over with Tipu Sultan in the Mysore country, the Company sent its troops to the southern country which disarmed the *Palaiyakkarars*, and whose forts were destroyed. There was one more uprising which took place in 1801 under the leadership of the Marudu Brothers of Sivagangai. This was also put down and in the same year the whole Carnatic, including Madurai and Tirunelveli, was finally ceded to the Company.²¹

The *Palayams* emerged as independent domains of the local political scene in the eighteenth century when the Nayak power declined. Kattabomman, the *Palaiyakkarars* or chieftains who ruled like little kings in their domain. In the case of Panjalankurichi, it is understandable, because by the time of the revolt of Kattabomman, Ramnad had succumbed and Pudukottai had surrendered in the latter part of the eighteenth century to the Company. When Kattabomman fought against the Company in 1799, those powers were not in a position to support him. Kattabomman's resistance was neither religion oriented nor nationalist but rather a military revolt. The violence and rupture that attended the Company's suppression of the *Palaiyakkarar's* resistance tells volumes about the nature of the colonial intervention in local society. The demilitarization of the zone before the introduction of the Zamindari in the place of the *Palayam* systems accomplished by Major Bannerman signalled the beginning of the transition from the pre-colonial domains to the colonial state.

End Notes

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