
PALMYRA TREE AND ITS ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF NADAR COMMUNITY OF KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT

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Abstract

Kanyakumari district is the southernmost tip of the Indian sub-continent lies between 77°05' and 77°36' of the eastern longitudes and 8°03' and 8°35' of the northern latitudes. The district is bounded by Tirunelveli district in the north and the north-east. The south-eastern boundary is the Gulf of Mannar. On the south and south-west, the boundaries are the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. On the west and north-west, it is bounded by Kerala. Kanyakumari district occupies 1684 sq.kms. The district has a warm humid climate, with no cold season. The summer season is particularly oppressive. The summer from March to May is followed by the south-west monsoon season from June to September. The period from October to November is the north-east monsoon season. Records of rainfall in the district are available for a good network of 19 stations for periods ranging from 15 to 70 years. The average annual rainfall in the district is 1469.7 mm. The density of population was 1,106 per sq.km in 2011 as against 995 per sq.km in 2001. Plantation crops of rubber, clove, nutmeg, pepper and pineapple are grown in the uplands. Crops like paddy, tapioca, banana and coconut are grown in the middle regions, and coconut and Cashew are grown in the lowlands. The district has favorable agro climatic condition to grow crops of different types such as cereals, pulses, oilseeds, fruits, vegetables, spices and condiments, fodder, rubber and green manure crops. The district was considered to be the granary of Travancore as it was well known for its irrigated paddy cultivation in the past. The district is also known for its 40 different genotypes in banana crop and 300 types in mangoes. This is the only district which bears off-season mango during October-November. Besides, the off season bearing on tamarind, pepper, Palmyra is also found.

Keywords: climatic condition, agro products, paddy cultivation, Sethu lakshmi Bai, taxation, Madurai Nayaks

A brief History of Kanyakumari District

The sangam classics refer to some of the notable 'Ay' kings who ruled this region and they were known as AyAndhiran, Titiyan-1, Titian-11, Alanchil porunan, Atiyan, sadayan, Kurunandhan, Karumandadakkan and Vikramaditya Varagunan. The epigraphic sources available in the Kanyakumari District speak of the rule of the Chola dynasty. The earliest inscription of Raja Raja discovered at Darsanamcope in the District relates to his 8th regnal year. This was followed by the discovery of inscriptions in the suchindram temple. They describe the Chola rulers like Uttama Chola, Rajendra Chola

who had their sway over Nanjilnadu in ancient times. The Chola rulers spread their reputation in Nanjilnadu upto the region of Kulothunga1. But with the rise of the Hoysalas and Western Chalukyas, Chola power declined. This decline of the Chola power infused a spirit of valor and enthusiasm among the Venad chieftains, and they established their hold over Nangilnadu in a gradual manner. There are ample evidences in literature and inscriptions to show that the pandyas were always in contact with Nanjilnadu. Kadungon, Maravarman,Sendon, Arikesari maravarman, kochadayan, Maravarman,sendon, Arikesari Maravarman, Kochadyan,Maravarman Raja Simha, jatila parantaka, Viranarayana, Varaguna 11 and Maravarman Rajasimha-11 were the rulers who ruled this region from 560A.D to 920. A.D. According to records, Vira kerala varma annexed the present Kanyakumaki, Suchindrum and other adjoining areas from a local chieftain who style himself as Nanjil kuravan. The policy of conquest started by Vira kerala Varma , was followed by the successors. During the 13th and 14th centuries A.D., venadu was ruled even some regions of the Pandyan Kingdom were brought under their control. This was achieved by Chera Udaya Marthanda varma(1383-1444) who brought a major portion of the present Tirunelveli District also under by powerful rulers like Vira UdayaMarthandavarma (1314-1350). At the time, even some regions of the Pandyan kingdom were brought under their control. This was achieved by Chera, Udaya Marthandavarma (1383-1444), who brought a major portion of the present Tirunelveli district also under his way. However, in course, the intervention of the Madurai Nayaks led to the fall of Venad. But they could not succeed much.

Bala Marthandavarma who ruled the country from 1729- 1758 A.D. defeated the feudal chieftains of Venad and consolidated the royal authority. After his death, Karthikai Thirunal ramavarma (Dharma Raja) who reigned between 1758-1798 A.D transferred the capital from padmanabhapuram to Trivandrum.. Balaramavarma (1798-1810) who succeeded Dharma raised huge taxes and people could not bear the burden of taxation. Therefore, they rose in revolt under the leadership of Veluthampi. The regency of Rani lakshmi Bai (1810-1815) witnessed improvements in trade and commerce through the enforcement of market regulations. In 1815, parvathibai (1815-1829) succeeded her sister Rani Lakshmi Bai. Ramavarma swathi Thirunal, who ruled from 1829-1847, introduced many administrative reforms in judiciary and implemented English education with the help of English Missionaries. He was also one of the musical maestros of south India. His successor, Uthiram Thirunal(1847-1860) improved the financial condition of the state by introducing the effective system of collection of revenue. In 1859, by a royal proclamation he abolished are restrictions on the use of the breast cloth by Nadar women in south Travancore.

Ayilyam Thirunal Ramavarma succeeded Uthiram Thirunal in 1860 and continued in power till 1880.. Ramavarma visakhmThirunal (1880-1885) a reputed scholar was the next ruler who initiated some reformative measures. Sri Moolam Thirunal (1885-1924)

succeeded by Ramavarma Visakam Thirunal. Sethu lakshmi Bai acted as regent from 1924 to 1931 for Sri Chithrai Thirunal as he was a minor. Sri Chithrai Thirunal who ascended to the throne in 1931, was last among the sovereigns of Travancore.

Nadars of Kanyakumari District

The Nadar community was not a single caste, but developed from an assortment of related subcastes and classes of different origins, which in course of time, came under the single banner Nadar. Nadars are predominant in the south Indian districts of Tuticorin, Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli and Virudhunagar. Earlier, against the spirit of universal brotherhood, existed the caste distinctions and disabilities, which prevailed within the traditional society of South Travancore. It was caste which decided the nature of the social relationship of individuals. Its principles made the major section of the people mere slaves of the dominant or privileged classes. Justice was administered according to the caste norms and very severe punishments were usually inflicted on criminals. People cried out against the injustice and oppression which prevailed throughout Travancore. Travancore society had many several caste divisions. The most chief community was the Nair community. The lower castes mainly comprised the Nadars and the Ezhavas. They suffered because of the domination of the upper caste. Since the Nadars belonged to the low caste group, they were not allowed to go near a Brahmin or Nair. Nadars were prohibited from doing many activities like taking water from the well, entry into the temple etc... Many economic and social restrictions were imposed on them. The beginning of nineteenth century witnessed a revolution. The upper class disturbances were one of the most important social upheavals in the 19th century Travancore. The most prevailing of the movements was the one by the Nadar and other backward communities for the right of women to cover their bosoms. With the help of the British Resident Col. Munro the Missionaries.

Palmyrah

The oldest Tamil book Tolkappiam mentioned the Palmyra flag of Balarama. Nakkirar in Purananuru verse 56 also praised Balarama carrying Palmyra flag and plough. The tree and its parts are used in hundreds of ways. No part of this tree is useless. So it is called Karpaga Taru. This is the '*Sthalviruksha*' (local tree) of the temples in Tiruppanandal, Tiruppanangkadu, Tiruppanaiyur, Tirumazalpadi and Tirukkurungkudi. Both Buddhists and Hindus worshiped this tree.

Palmyrah tree is a tall and swaying tree generally known as 'Borassus Flabellifer'. It is known as Panai in Tamil language. In Telugu, it is called as Thadi chettu and in Malayalam this tree is named as Karimpana. In English, the tree has some other names except the Palmyra Palm Tree and these names are the Fan Palm, Barb Tree, Toddy Palm and Tala Palm. This tree is found in the drier areas of India, Sri Lanka, and Burma and also in most of the tropical countries. Palmyrah trees are known for their innate adaptability to climate. It is the only crop which can survive under tropical conditions. It

can survive in drought prone areas. In olden days, the tropical Palmyrah trees were used as bordering identification mark in dry land farming. A luxuriant growth of them could be found along the banks of streams and rivers. It helps to strengthen the river banks and tighten the soil. In Tamil Nadu, it is widely cultivated in the southern most districts. In Kanyakumari district, it was cultivated in about 533 acres according to an estimate made in 1981.

The leaves are used for thatching roofs, screening as fence, as mats, baskets, fans, hats, umbrellas, buckets, sandals and as writing material. In ancient times, the mature leaves are seasoned with boiled water turmeric, and sun dried. These are then shaped into apt dimensions for writing and written on with a spine. They are called as "*Olai chuvadigal*" in Tamil and some of these are still preserved with great care in the Government oriental Libraries in India. The sacred writings of Hindus their source of wisdom were inscribed in these olden leaves. The remaining of the leaves after using for thatching and fencing are sold to the farmers which was used as organic fertilizers in their farms and fields. The wood of a fairly old tree is hard, strong and durable and it is generally used for various construction works. The vacant stem of the tree is used as water pipes. The fiber from the stalk is used for making brushes and ropes. The ridge of the leaf called '*Eekku*' and this is used in conjunction with leaves to weave baskets etc and also as brushes. The leaf stalk is stronger and used as basket bands and the when the stalk is stripped into thin strips it is called Naar and used in different ways to tie things. It is believed that the cot made by Palmyra wood and fiber called '*Naar Kattil*' in local dialect has high medicinal values for the mankind. The seeds, stalks and most part of the wood are dried and used as firewood. In an outline no parts of the Palmyra is unused.

Nadars and Palmyra cultivation in the District

The ancient historian Herodotus tells that in 400 BC, the Palmyra-Tappers (the Nadars) were Valiant Fighters and good Tradesmen, dealing with inter-Continental Trade. They made settlements in Syria, and taught the art of writing to the Greeks. They also spread the Culture of 'Burial of dead ' to the world. They exported processed Palm-Juice (in the chemical form of Alcohol) to countries like Egypt, for purification and preservation of the dead-bodies (Mummies).

Historically, most Nadars were cultivators of palmyra trees and jaggery and a few were also involved in the toddy trade. Nadar climbers had faced discrimination from major upper castes in some regions due to their association with toddy and were also prohibited to enter temples built by higher ranked castes. In the early nineteenth century, the Nadars were a community mostly engaged in the palmyra industry, including the production of toddy. The Nadar economy centered on the palmyrah products, then the only commercially viable crop in the region a martial art *Southern Kalaripayattu* since around 1958 it was historically practiced by the Nadars. Nadars

were considered lower than other middle castes, but relatively higher than the low castes. Although associated with toddy, the Nadars mostly did not used to consume it.

Botanically speaking the palmyrah trees are monocotyledon. The leaves are fan like. When they are green they could be used for serving food (in local dialect ' pattai Kanji' which is a popular food of locals), basket making, mat making and for thatching huts. Palmyra tree is an important crop of Kanyakumari district. It is a major vital crop for the small scale industrial development in the Kanyakumari district. The life of the Nadar community of Kanyakumari district was earlier depend on the products yielded from the Palmyra trees and its cultivation .Each and every part of Palmyra tree is used for the survival and development of the" Nadar" community which is one of the major community of Kanyakumari district.. Bye- Products of the Palmyra tree like, Karuppatti, Pathaneer, Nongu, Jaggery, Palmleaf and toddy helped the Nadar community to become the small scale Entrepreneur's of Kanyakumari district. They trade with Jaggery and other Palmyra products to the nearby factories and towns. The Nadar community belong to earlier Travancore samasthanam were the best Palmyra climbers (Tappers) in the District. There are two varieties of Palmyra trees are commonly seen in the District.

In local dialect it is called Alavu panai (Male) and Paruvapanai (Female). Infrastructure of the old houses of Nadars' had a store room called '*Pathayapirai*' which is located exactly on the top of the Kitchen area to store Jaggery which is collected , processed and preserved throughout the year. The warmness helped to reduce the impact of air moisture on the Jaggery and keeps it sturdy. Every farmer or small land lords had at least one or two Palmyra trees in their vegetation area used to get 5 to 6 litres of padaneer or Toddy every day and once in two days they used to prepare jaggery in houses. The handmade jaggery were stored in the *pathayapira* and they sell it during the rate was in peak. Some group of Nadar traders migrated from southern Tirunelveli to northern Tirunelveli and Virudhunagar and they became commercially skillful and by the late 19th century were economically and socially sound.

Palmyra in Warfare

Role of Palmyra in the Colachel war victory is interesting and noteworthy. Colachel Victory is the first ever victory of the Indian Army over an European Naval fleet in the Indian History. The Naval force of the Dutch East India Company led by Admiral Eustachius De Lannoy came to Colachel Port to attack the then Travancore King H.H. Marthanda Varma on 10August 1741. It is said that the King Marthanda Varma succeeded in this war with all the support of the brave fishermen of Colachel area. The Fishermen along with the army of the King Marthanda Varma cut many palm trees along the coastal belt and placed it in bullock carts. These bullock carts were placed along the coastal line in the position which replicates the Dutch's Cannons. The Dutch Naval force was threatened with this set up and in fear the Dutch army surrendered to King Marthanda Varma.

Conclusion

By the beginning of 18th and 19th century AD, with the presence of the British , French, the Dutch,. etc., have engulfed the power of the 'Nadalvars'. But by the beginning of the 20th century AD, the Nadars are reduced to a economically backward community, being snatched off their lands and wealth by the *Palayakkara* (Nayaks) . This age is followed by the imposition of taxation (Heavy as 120 types of taxes were levied on them). This period is considered as the most 'Dark Period' in the history of the Nadars. Further, they were humiliated and suppressed in the name of sociological norms, by creating new rules that they shall not enter into the temples, Nadar women cannot wear clothes on the upper part of the body, and must perform *uliyam* (free service without wages), etc.. Nadars had to fight in the latter 19th and 20th century AD. Many leaders involved themselves for the struggle including Sri Vaikunda Swamigal. Saint Ayya Vaikundaswamigal who fought for the rights of this community was arrested, put in jail and hassled by the rulers in many ways. He defied the written conditions of the King to make comprise with him to quit the Revolutions. Then the movement was followed by Sri Narayan Guru, and after a few decades, by Chattambiswamigal for the cause of the equal rights for Shudras. Christian missionaries also have supported and helped Nadars in this process. Finally Nadars got their rights registered through legal declaration in the 20th century AD. Nadar community is termed as a business community. They are living up to their names. They normally don't like to work for others. They like to do their own business. Nadar's are running a lot of business institutions ranging from grocery shops (most of the grocery shops in Tamilnadu is owned by Nadars), software firms (NIIT, HCL, Ram Software, VEL Computers, Printing press, fireworks, Safety matches... etc.. now-a-days Nadars are concentrating in building schools, colleges, Hospitals.. etc. Nadar community provided a lot of well known Institutions, organizations, business to the world. They learned their unique technique in business from trading only Palmyra products and there is an invisible relationship still continues.

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