

## Formation of Nerkattanseval as A Palayam Domain in The Southern Pandya Country

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During the eighteenth century the stormy political atmosphere favoured the growth of power and status of the *Palayams* in Southern Tamil Country. If they owed their existence to their strength and service, the same factors accounted for the extension of their authority.[1] The period between 1650 and 1760 witnessed an unprecedented growth of the influence of the *Palayams*. The political chaos of the early seventeenth and eighteenth centuries caused by Maratha and Mughal invasions contributed to the growth of the influence of the *Palayams*. In an attempt to escape from the terrors wrought by interminable conflicts, villages sought the protection of the chieftains. Since there was no central authority during the period from 1730's to 1740's in Southern Tamil Country due to the war of succession in Arcot, the welfare and security of the people were threatened. In these circumstances, the people and their village heads favoured the protection offered by the *Palayams* for their own safety. Meanwhile, the villages, which had already accepted the protection of the *Palayams*, paid enhanced rates in proportion to the increased responsibility undertaken by the *Palayams* for holding the disorders at bay. Subsequently the *Palayams* extended their social and ritual sovereignty over the territory and declared their independence from the central authority. The present chapter analyses the context which created a platform for the *Palayakkarars* to become independent chiefs of their domains and how far it may right to call them little kings. The status of the *Palayakkarars* was enhanced in their own territory and they expected their authority to be recognized as legitimate. In the course of their action the *Palayakkarars* had to face opposition from the Nawab and the Company.

### Palayams to tinyKingdoms

Each state with territorial boundary in the eighteenth century tried to attain political supremacy through military power. To gain economic resources was their principal aim as the revenues of the area procured them the means to maintain an armed force with which they ensured their authority and influence. In the Southern Tamil Country, there was a political confusion which favoured the growth of the *Palayams*. The latter was a system which emerged originally as an administrative convenience in the sixteenth century had gradually obtained political status in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Initially the *Palayakkarars* felt that the *Palayams* were under the control of central government, and they were just chiefs of the areas. But in course of time as the power of the Nayaks waned, they made use of the weekend central authority to gain independent status. The political, administrative and social factors are discussed below:

### Political circumstances

"Political chaos disrupts the status of many, but for others it provides opportunities for political advancement, social mobility and economic gain." [2]

The above observation by Barbara N. Ramusack explains the nature of the eighteenth century very clearly. The *Palayakkarars* took advantage of the political chaos that was prevalent in the eighteenth century to achieve political advancement, social status and economic gain. In the early part of the sixteenth century, the Nayaks of Madurai created seventy two key bastions surrounding the central fort of Madurai, each one under the command of a *Palayakkarar* who was appointed from the warriors groups, particularly from the Maravan and Tottiyar castes that provide line of defense network right across the Tamil Country. [3] The Nayaks were the creator of *Palayams* and the latter had no connection with the Nawab of Arcot. The Nayak dynasty disappeared from the political scene in the Southern Tamil Country after it was defeated in 1736 by Chanda Sahib of the Navayat clan who were ruling from Arcot. The latter defeated the Nayaks but were not able to establish a stable government. They claimed the legitimacy of conquest and tried unsuccessfully to reach a settlement with the *Palayakkarars*. [4] The disappearance of the central power and the weakness of the Nawab's position further emboldened the *Palayakkarars* who had already become independent. The latter being local administrators claimed their legitimacy from the Nayaks, even though the Nayaks had not granted them proper political authority and refused to serve as the vassals of the Nawab.

Chanda Sahib, a Navayat competed for the Nawabi of Arcot, but it was contested by Muhammad Ali a Wallajah. There was a fight for legitimacy of rule between these two rivals. While Chanda Sahib got the help of the French, Muhammad Ali Wallajah was assisted by the English (the Company). The political chaos and confusion in the Carnatic *payenghat* continued till the Wallajah ruler assumed power in 1749. [5] During this period, the *Palayams* which were previously paying tribute to the Nayaks freed themselves of this obligation and become independent. The heir of the Nayaks, Vijayakumaran was trying in vain to get his legitimacy recognized. Generally if a state was defeated by another, the vanquished kingdom its subordinates become subservient to the victorious. But the *Palayams* refused to accept the Nawab's jurisdiction. By the time the Nawab defeated the Nayaks, the *Palayams* had declared their independence. [6] Further the Nawab ordered the *Palayams* for the regular payment of revenue and forced them to provide provision of troops when requested. The *Palayakkarars* at every opportunity tried to avoid fulfillment of these obligations. On several occasions the Nawab sent troops to try to bring the subordinates to terms. On these occasions *Palayakkarars* showed their disobedience to the central powers. [7]

The Nawab and the Company waged a series of wars against the *Palayakkarars* on default of payment of tribute which created an animosity among them. [8] The inhabitants were ill-treated and the chieftains were forced to supply provisions to the forces, give presents to the officials and the Company. [9] The *Palayakkarars* who were unable to pay the huge arrears of tribute occasionally rebelled and joined hands with the enemies of the Nawab like Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan. [10] The *Palayam* of Panjalankurichi was supported by the Dutch who provided valuable commodities and supplied arms.

### Welfare measures

The *Palayakkarar*, with the help of nominal officers of the state, administered justice through courts. He held durbars and used to travel on horses, elephant, camel and palanquins. [11] On every important occasion he held a durbar. He conducted official communications with his sovereign and other rulers through accredited ministers. He collected taxes, presided over the distribution of justice, maintained order and kept his own troops. He did certain economic functions too, for he undertook charitable activities, cleared forests, executed irrigation works and built villages.

Pulithevan was able to give a standard and structural government. According to oral sources, the people welcomed their rule. The oral sources and manuscripts explain that his *Palayam*

was in good condition and agriculture flourished under their rule. The people had everything required for their subsistence. The *Palayam* system satisfied the requirements of the time. The rural areas seem to have taken rapid strides in agricultural improvement. Pulithevan's *Palayam* was in good condition and the state of agriculture was well. *Pulithevan Sindhu* describes his domain as follows:

Filling up the ponds full and Cutting channels they leveled the fields; Truly in the fertile land of the Vatakkattar Puli The country dotted with water — lilies and lotus Opening the sluice, watering the fields Plantain, sugarcane, turmeric and ginger; Ploughing the fields property, raising the corns And protecting them carefully; Water flowing heavy, coconut bear well In Pulithevan's rich land southern.[12]

Sometimes on the payment of revenue the Palayakkarars forced the peasants to clear waste lands and therefore most of the waste lands were brought under cultivation. It protected the country against foreign invasions.[13]

Similarly in Nerkattanseval is described in the oral sources as a lushful and green land. The description goes as follows:

Truly, in the rich land of Vatakkathan Puli, Lily and lotus bloom in the pools Upon the colourful jack trees leap plantain bunches, Augmented by areca palms, Mango trees and areca palms soar, While turmeric and ginger spice the air, Water gushes and coconut palms yield, In the good land of southern Puli.[14]

The lands with good cultivation were under the control of the *Palayakkarars*. They appointed Pallans to cultivate their own land. And a part of the lands were given to *Sherogars* who performed the duty of wars also apart from cultivation.

As the *Palayakkarars* paid special attention to the revenue administration, they got more revenues by which they were able to strengthen their economic status. Among the revenue collected 1/3 was set apart for the personal expenditure of the *Palayakkarar*. Considerable revenue was utilized for the military of the *Palayakkarar*. Primarily a portion of the revenue was given to the Nayaks as tribute. 2/3 of the revenue was utilized by the *Palayakkarars* and when the Nayaks waned, the *Palayakkarars* kept themselves the revenue and became the free heads of their territory. Collection of revenue in the *Palayams* placed the *Palayakkarans* in an important position politically as well as economically.[15]

### **Social status**

Although the state in the eighteenth century was *segmentary* in structure, culturally there were often rituals, traditions, myths and histories through which the political order was legitimized and maintained. When the Nayaks succeeded the Pandyas of Madurai, they tried to establish their control over the Tamil speaking indigenous groups in the Pandya Nadu. The vadugas or the Telugu speaking groups had migrated to the Tamil areas especially during the Vijayanagar occupation of the Tamil region. The latter supported the Nayaks whereas the former tried to restore the Pandya rule.[16] Because of this reason enmity grew among them. Some *Kaval chiefs* did not submit to the authority of the Nayaks. In this circumstance, the Nayaks made some of the recalcitrant chiefs as *Palayakkarars* and gained their support and through them established control over the indigenous population.

The *Palayakkarar* Pulithevan belonged to warrior castes and earned a respectable status in the society after becoming *Palayakkarars*. The early status of these castes was not up to this level. The village set up of *Palayam* explains the status of all the castes in the eighteenth century. The *Palayakkarars* functionaries (*parivaram*), Maravans, the warrior caste and the Reddys, the Telugu cultivator caste and Tottiyans, the Telugu warrior caste settled in the lands between the village and the *Palayakkarars* fort. The medium sized *Palayam* like *Palayam* of Nerkattanseval emerged as leading *Palayam* among the seventy two *Palayams* and maintained their dignity and possession of their *Palayams*. Nerkattanseval was in the position to form a confederacy among the Maravan *Palayams*. This satellite *Palayam* used to make a visit the leading *Palayam* to get problems solved. Being heads of the alliances the *Palayakkarars* possessed a social status with all the necessary

rituals, oral traditions and myths to legitimize their political authority and hence were not ready to withdraw their dignity and position.

Bernard S Cohn observes that some of the lineages physically divided the lands that were given to them for management, others divided only their share of the produce, keeping the land together. No matter what was shared, the principle of sharing was based genealogically, each line of descendants from the common ancestor being followed out and each adult male member of the lineage receiving his share on the basis of descent. The lineages often combined to fight off threats from neighboring lineages, to fight against the common enemy.[17] Lineages of the *Palayams* in the Southern Tamil Country belonged to two castes named Maravan and Tottiyar. Pulithevan belonged to the Maravan clan. In those days, because of their strength, hard life and bravery, they were given the duty of *kaval*. They got remuneration as kind and sometimes land. Because of which they became a richer community than the other groups and common people in the society. Such brave men became chieftains in the late medieval times and early modern period. In the society they were respected for the genealogy.

S. Kadhivel explains thus: "The Maravas...used to carry a long stick and knife called a *Pitchwa*. This stick could be used to beat opponents and the *Pitchwa* fixed at the top of the stick could be used as a spear. These were the inseparable companions of the Maravas. When they heard the trumpet sound they would proceed directly to their leaders' place from wherever they were. Those working in the fields would directly rush to the battlefields." [18] Dirks describes the status of Maravans in the eighteenth century as follows: "...they (Maravans) had to establish a legitimate claim to kingly status..."

### People's Support

Who won the patta to be taken in triumph in all directions eight? Puli sovereign, the lord of the south! for whose, Spectacular procession triumphant through Maturai, The auspicious hour and day were marked.[19]

Although the royal grant was given to the *Palayams* and gifts and presents made to the temple and supreme heads, if a state had to survive, that needs the support of the subjects of the particular state. When Pulithevan was defeated in 1759 by Khan Sahib, he was exiled in the Western Ghats for few years before he returned to Kadaladi. Here he was helped by the people of his *Palayam*. He was given food in his place of hiding and the people brought the food in their boxes which they used to carry when they were going for agricultural work. All this they did without the knowledge of the Nawab and the Company officers. The place where the food was given to him is called 'Sorittan Parai meaning "food givers' rock" which is situated in the Western Ghats west of Vasudevanallur.[20]

Pulithevan had the character of providing food and dress to the poor. He gave 12 *marakkals* and 6 *kalams* of paddy to the labourers who were working in his *Palayam*. He arranged the marriage of the young couples inhabiting his *Palayam*. He was a role model to all the people who lived in his *Palayam*. He got up before sunrise, and he performed *pathabooja* (anointing the feet) to *Siva bhakthas* (worshippers of God Siva) and Brahmans. Before having his morning food, he used to present new dresses to the destitute.[21]

### Domain formation

The power and status of the various *Palayakkarars* could not have been the same; it is extremely unlikely that all of them had equally good record of past services and equal possessions. In course of time at least, there would have been changes in their attitude and position. Consequently their obligations would have been different.[22] The powers of the *Palayams* continued to increase throughout the Nayaks period and, by the end of the seventeenth century, some of the more dominant *Palayams*, such as Ramnad, Sivagangai and Pudukottai, had become virtual kingdoms, having large territories. Just below them were medium-sized military domains of

Panjankurichi, Ettaiyapuram, Nerkattanseval and Sivagiri. In the least level Kolvarpatti and Mannarkottai were there with three to five villages.

The *Palayakkarars* gave military protection to the people, their communities, suppressed the criminals, punished the offenders and paid compensation in the event of their failure to protect property lost through theft.[23] This institution satisfied the requirements of the time; peace and order was established on a firm basis, and the country took rapid strides in agricultural improvement. Forests were cleared, and much waste land was brought under cultivation. The system was a good safeguard against foreign invasion and especially against foreign occupation.

Pamela Price points out that a king's duties included, offering protection to prospective subjects, adjudicating disputes among social groups including kin people, class and castes, patronizing religious leaders and institutions, and distributing gifts, or what has been labeled 'dharmic largesse', for other cultural activities and extending help to social groups claiming kingly support.[24]

The Vijayanagar Empire was succeeded by the Nayaks whose power declined in the 1730s leaving the local powers without any political overlord. These local components, the *Palayakkarar* polities, steadily assumed greater military prowess, often at the expense of their weak neighbours or the feeble central power to build themselves as, regional powers and made their areas as independent domains where they introduced systematic structural government with hierarchical officers. During this process *Palayam* like Nerkattanseval became head of powerful military confederacies.

**Table**  
**Growth and gradual transformation of Maravans and Tottiyans from warriors to tiny kingdoms**

Stage	Earlier Occupation	Service	Honor and status
1	Maravans and Tottiyans were highway robbers and ordinary people	through their physical strength and rudeness	became soldiers and warriors
2	From soldiers and warriors	through royal grant as holders of bastions of Madurai fort	became warrior chiefs
3	From warrior chiefs	through service to king, paying tribute and gifts to central power and maintaining internal and external security	became chieftains
4	From chieftains	through evolution of dharmic kingship by donating gifts to temples, Brahmans and the poor	became little kings[25]

Source: Nicholas B. Dirks, 'The Past of a Palayakkarar: the Ethnohistory of a South Indian Little king', in W. Spencer George, *Temples, Kings and Peasants: Perceptions of South India's Past*, New Era Publications, Madras, p. 120.

### Overview

Palayam system was created by the Nayaks during sixteenth century. The *Palayakkarars*, the holder of the *Palayams* became true servants of the latter. *Palayakkarars* were the acknowledged heads having all power in their *Palayams*. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the Nayaks disappeared from the political scene in Southern Tamil Country. The Nawab of Arcot succeeded the former and tried to bring the *Palayakkarars* under his control. The latter being a

successor to the Nayaks functioned independently. They got the royal grant from the Nayaks. Further they ruled their domain independently which helped them to control the local peasants, merchants and artisans. Apart from that they involved in the developmental works. They created a standard structural government, cleared the jungle, accommodated more cultivators, improved the cultivation, developed irrigation facilities, made the settlement for new cultivators in their domain and appointed proper officials for the revenue collection. They maintained wealth through the collection of revenue in various ways. They participated in the religious ceremony and donated to the temples, Brahmans and the poor. They presented gifts and presents to the temple and got honours and titles from the central power sometimes even from the people. They maintained a dignity in the neighbouring *Palayams* and whenever there was a call for their help, particularly the Nerkattanseval *Palayam* and the Panjalankurichi *Palayam*, used to solve those problems. They invaded other territories and sometimes made plunders also. They maintained a regular military force with which they were able to guard their domain. And they appointed *kavalkarans* to serve the *stalam kaval* and *desha kaval*. They were the ultimate in the judicial decision maintained as single head. Pulithevan maintained order in his *Palayam* and never failed to use the opportunity to declare their domains as independent. Pulithevan belonged to the community of Maravans who were involved in robbery in the past. Both Marava castes gradually got its evolution towards the status of chieftains that have been labeled here as tiny kings. The discussion above has explored the circumstances that favoured domain formation, how the Palayakkarars formed their domains as tiny kingdoms and how they lived more or less like (little) kings of their domains. When the political, economic, social and ritual status and independence of *Palayams* were shaken, they put up a fierce struggle which was inevitable.

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