



A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS ON THE DECLINE OF NAIR MILITIA SYSTEM IN TRAVANCORE

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Abstract;- The Nairs were the original inhabitants of South India who engaged fulltime in agricultural pursuits . The Aryanisation brought about complete change in their social life. They raised them to the rank of Kshatriyas, for they performed the duties of the feudal soldiers, particularly the protection of the land and people. But the formation of the modern state of Travancore by Marthanda Varma. coming of Europeans, western military training, decline of traditional martial arts etc caused the decline of Nair militia system in Travancore.

Key Words: -Militia, Nagar, Hirannyagharbham, Chaver, Ettuveetil pillamar, Annavis, D'Lannoy, Pullipattalam, Viruthi land, Sambandham.

The Nair community occupies a very significant role in the socio-political and military history of Travancore. During the 11th century AD, the Nairs organised themselves as 'Nair militia' or the irregular force for a common goal. Only the able bodied men from the Nair community were admitted in the militia. They boasted that the Nairs were the only deserving community for military life. Till the arrival of the Europeans, it was the Nairs who protected the life and property of the king and its people. Such power and position were acquired by the Nairs only after the Aryan migration towards the south and hitherto they had a glorious past.

K.P. Padmanabha Menon states that, a group of serpent worshippers settled in Kerala; was known as 'Nagar'. Even today the Nairs are seemed to be the serpent worshippers¹. The term Nair is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Nayaka' which means 'leader'². During the initial period of Aryanisation, the term Nair was used to denote the common people who were in the services of the king. Gough held the view that, the term Nair was not then a caste name but a title conferred by the king on lineage whose members had won special military honour³. But later, such several families formed a common tie and gradually assumed the character of a caste due to the influence of the Brahmins. Thus the Nairs appeared as a caste group only after the 8th century AD⁴. It also clearly proves that, the Nairs originally belonged to the Dravidian stock and lived in Kerala long before the Aryan invasion.

The Nairs were the original inhabitants of South India who engaged fulltime in agricultural pursuits⁵. The Aryanisation brought about complete change in their social life. They raised them to the rank of Kshatriyas, for they performed the duties of the feudal soldiers, particularly the protection of the land and people. George woodcock says, 'the Nairs were the feudal land holders, locally called Sudras, but performed the functions of the Kshatriyas⁶. The Brahmins had the right to Kshatriyanise the Nairs. For that purpose, the Brahmins created a ceremony called 'hirannyagharbham'⁷. Hence the Nairs devoted their whole life for the material well-being of the Brahmins and considered that, it was their pious duty to serve under them⁸. The increased power and prestige of the Nairs intensified the caste system⁹. Gradually, the Brahmins dragged the agricultural Nairs in to the more war like tendencies and later they themselves grew up as a military class of the land. Thus the Nair militia was formed during the 11th century AD which rendered the services of the military, the police, the spy and the scout like that of the 'Chaver' army did. Since the 11th century AD to the dawn of the 18th century, it was the Nair militia which made domination in every aspects of Travancore administration. Such a giant irregular forces of the land got a steady decline when Marthanda Varma formed the modern state of Travancore in 1729 AD on the ruins of feudal country¹⁰. The foundation of Nair militia was laid by the Brahmins, its superstructure was later raised by the feudal chieftains and its downfall was caused by the English East India Company.

When Marthanda Varma came into power in Travancore, it was a timely necessity for him to destroy the power of the Nair chieftains. Marthanda Varma had to face so many difficulties from his cousin brothers. They made troubles to his authority and hence he took first step towards the destruction of the traditional Nair nobility¹¹. He followed blood and iron policy and crushed the power of 'Ettuveetil pillamar' and then he created a group of nobles called 'Annavis'¹².

When Marthanda Varma ascended the throne, the Travancore army mainly consisted of the irregular forces of the Nairs which were not sufficient for the maintenance of a vast empire¹³. Moreover, the internal instability, military weakness, attack of Marava troops from Tamil Nadu and the Madurai rulers etc induced Marthanda Varma to form a standing army. Coming of European powers like the English and the Dutch created suspicion in the mind of the monarch. The feudal chieftains also made troubles to him and they fought each other for political supremacy. In such a situation Marthanda Varma appointed Kumarswami Pillai as his commander in chief with Tanu Pillai as his assistant¹⁴. They rendered great services for the expansion of the narrow strips of Travancore country into a vast popular state. He realised the fact that, the time was most suitable for the adoption of European warfare in order to ensure victory. Moreover about six thousand men of the Travancore army were defeated at Quilon by the Dutch and they were forced to return. This incident might have shocked Marthanda Varma and convinced the fact, that a standing army was an essential part of the land.

Marthanda Varma decided to form a standing army under the guidance and instruction of D'Lannoy¹⁵. D'Lannoy modernised the Travancore army by implementing most modern European techniques of warfare and weapons instead of traditional systems. He recruited the sons of the soil in the modernised army irrespective of caste, colour, creed including the Nairs, Nadars, Ezhavas, Christians etc...¹⁶. The reorganisation of the irregular force into standing army brought about drastic changes in the society. Western military techniques and tactics were taught to them and they gave up their traditional warfare in the standing army. D'Lannoy instructed men in western style and he made everything that was needed for the defence of the country. He recruited several men of his race as Captains in the different corps which he thoroughly reorganised and gave the name 'Pullipattalam'¹⁷. One of the significant effects of this reorganisation was that, the social privileges enjoyed by the traditional Nair soldiers

began to diminish in a considerable number. Accordingly their high position in the society as a military class of the land and martial spirit declined forever¹⁸.

The reorganisation of the army and the destruction of old feudal system by Marthanda Varma made the state supreme in South India. He changed the Nair state into a most powerful military state¹⁹. As a result, the traditional Nair militia became unnecessary. Even then, the traditional Nair militia continued as a very small irregular force and rendered services to the king. That degradation of the Nair militia threw off the Nairs to seek some other occupation for which they had no previous experience. That was the fate of the Nairs in the conquered countries too; because Marthanda Varma put an end to the military career of all the Nairs within the conquered territories and he abolished the armies of the surrendered chieftains²⁰. He appointed numerous Tamil Brahmins, instead of Nairs into the government services²¹. Those wise policies of Marthanda Varma no doubt, directly paved the way for the decline of the traditional Nair militia system and their dominance in the society. Gradually the martial spirit of the Nairs, not fully, declined considerably. A large number of Nair nobles and lay men diverted their attention towards agriculture and other occupations. But one noted fact is that, majority of the soldiers in the standing army which formed by Marthanda Varma was the well trained Nairs with most modern war weapons. Therefore, the traditional Nairs could still maintain their military designation; not as irregular force but as government servants. At the same time, the supremacy of the traditional Nair nobles and their soldiers disappeared completely from the soil of Travancore²².

The westernisation of the native army resulted in the liberation of the country from the clutches of feudalism²³. With the help of an efficient standing army, Marthanda Varma annexed the petty kingdoms of the feudal chieftains. The land annexation means, the transfer of 'Janmom' rights²⁴ from individual chief to the Travancore state. The lands of the feudal lords like 'Ettuveetil pillamar' had already been confiscated and all Nair chieftains were forced to pay taxes to the government. This social and economic situation reduced the Nairs to the status of an ordinary citizen.

The decline of the power and position of the feudal nobles caused the ruin of the feudal socio-economic order in Travancore. Robin Jeffrey states that, "D'Lannoy reorganised the military and changed it from a feudal force rallied by local chief, to a salaried, drilled and unified army, its composition was overwhelmingly Nair and their

militia was not abolished but the new army represented the further incursion of the independence of local Nair leaders”²⁵.

The attack of Mysoreans – HyderAli and Tipu Sultan- in Travancore and Malabar was also responsible for the decline of the Nair militia system in Travancore. Before the Mysorean invasion the Brahmins and the Nairs were the prominent communities in Travancore and Malabar²⁶. A major portion of the land was occupied by them and the muslims were the peasants attached to the soil called ‘Chermakkal’²⁷. But the Mysorean invasion deteriorated the complete social situation. Tipu sultan captured the land from the Hindus and distributed it among the Muslim peasants. The result was that, the majority of the landless Muslim peasants received taxable land and became land lords. The landless Hindus, due to severe religious persecution under the Mysoreans, sought assylum in Travancore²⁸. The Travancore Rajah Karthika Tirunal Rama Varma welcomed them whole heartedly and provided enough facilities for their better living²⁹. Moreover the Malabar Nairs had a wrong belief that, they were superior to the southern people. They made dominance over the native people and the inferiority complex among the native Nairs caused social degradation like that of the other caste Hindus. Thus Mysorean invasion made some psychological impact among the traditional Nair soldiers and shattered the myth of their old social superiority. Moreover, it affected the administration and induced the Maharajah to reorganise the army. The result was that a large number of traditional Nair soldiers were thrown out of employment and they were forced to select other occupations³⁰. The unfavourable situation changed their economic condition and forced them to do any other profession. The professional change also deteriorated Nair domination in Travancore.

The uncompromising attitude of the Travancore sovereigns like Marthanda Varma towards the mercenary soldiers was also one among the reasons for the decline of the traditional Nair militia system from the soil of Travancore. Even their remunerations were withheld by him. That suppression from the part of the sovereign resulted in a series of revolts by the mercenaries. The battle of Ambalapuzha on 3rd January 1754, was the last fight in the traditional style in which the soldiers of Ambalapuzha fought in the old style against Marthanda Varma’s men who fought in the modern style ³¹. With that battle, the power and position of the Nair soldiers weakened in the Travancore society.

Some of the wise policies introduced by the second sovereign H.H Dharmarajah also adversely affected the very existence of the traditional Nair militia system in Travancore. Dharmarajah paid much attention for the reorganisation of his army. In his attempt, he was ably assisted by Aiyappan Marthanda Pillai ,Rajakesavadas³² and Captain D'Lannoy. In 1793 AD he received two thousand stands of arms from the British in return for pepper⁴⁸. The flow of the company's weapons in to Travancore deteriorated not only the economic structure of the country but also the traditional Nair militia system of the land.

In 1800 AD Veluthampi became the Dalawa of Travancore. Even though he belonged to Nair community, he followed an unfavourable attitude towards the traditional Nair militia. In 1805, he made an agreement with English East India Company by which he reduced the strength of the small troop of Nairs. Those who opposed him were hanged or beheaded which weakened their militia power.

The oppressive, suppressive, policies of the British government also responsible for the decline of the traditional Nair militia system in Travancore. In 1792 AD, the Srirangapattam treaty laid the foundation of company administration in Malabar. The British intention was the emasculation of the traditional Nair militia. The East India Company had rightly understood the potentiality and calibre of the Nair militia who engaged in guerrilla warfare. Thus the destruction of the military character of the Nairs was a political necessity for the company officials³³. The effects of the British action in Malabar, affected Travancore also and the new social transformation forced the Nairs to divert their attention from the militia to concentrate more on family obligations³⁴.

On 17th November 1795, the Travancore government signed the subsidiary alliance treaty with the English East India Company for the defence of the country, when Tipu Sultan attacked Travancore³⁵. As a matter of fact, Travancore country completely became a subsidiary state of the British. One tragic event in connection with the treaty was that, the military supremacy of the traditional Nairs declined; because of the defence of the country was taken over by the company. British officers and nobles used the able bodied Nair soldiers as watchmen, body guards, servants etc. Those soldiers were not at all well-treated by the English. Thus the imperialist tendencies of the company also resulted in the decline of the traditional Nair militia system.

The Land Rights proclamation Acts and the abolition of traditional 'viruthi' land(land rewarded for Military service) system was also one of the contributing factors of the decline of the Nair militia system. In 1860's the Travancore government took a series of land reforms proclamations and in 1865, the Travancore government conferred full ownership rights on all its tenants, ie those hold land from the state. Immediately, many Nairs attempted to realise the value of their lands through sale. Thus a large number of landless farmers of other communities received lands for agriculture.

The decline of 'sambandham'³⁶ system directly affected the very existence of the traditional Nair militia system. As soldiers, the Nair men were frequently away from their native villages for several months, a year and often on the move. ie, it would be fallacious to argue that the military organization was the cause of the marriage system or vice versa. There was a fairly evident functional "fit" between the Nair's military role and their marriage system. When the 'sambandham' system of marriage declined the militia life of the traditional Nair men was also disintegrated.

Abolition of slavery with the inspiration of the Christian missionaries by the Travancore sovereign H.H Sri Utham Thirunal Marthanda Varma also became a fatal blow to the Nair dominance and their militia system from the soil of Travancore³⁷. It was the Christian missionaries who first raised their voice against slavery system. With their inspiration, in 1812, Col. Munro, the Resident Dewan of Travancore influenced the Travancore government and strictly prohibited the purchase and sale of all the slaves other than those attached to the soil³⁸. The Nairs vehemently criticized the emancipation proclamation and they stated that, "the emancipation will cause the gradual dislocation of the economic structure which depended on slave labour". Hence the Christian missionaries and the low caste Hindus clamoured for social reforms and thus the king of Travancore issued another proclamation for the emancipation of slaves on 25th June 1855³⁹. Thus slavery system was completely abolished from the soil of Travancore which became a heavy shock to the orthodox traditional Nairs. Soon the Nairs prevented the western intervention and their reforms⁴⁰. The rise of Shannar community, with the support of the Christian missionaries, also became a powerful hindrance for the domination of the Nairs. That social equalisation reduced the power, dignity and position of the traditional Nair soldiers⁴¹.

The Christian Missionaries found the fact that the spread of education was the only way to remove all the caste barricades⁴². As a result of the missionary education, western ideas and medicine spread all over Travancore which deeply influenced even the Nair youths. Both qualitative and quantitative western education replaced the traditional Nair's kalari system of education and thus reflected their strength in the government services⁴³. The increased standard of living with high education definitely forced them to give up their traditional militia service forever.

The development of capitalistic economy as a result of the western intervention during 1860s in Travancore also gave a powerful boost to the decline of the traditional Nair militia system. In 1860's Travancore developed as an export crop economy⁴⁴. The government relinquished the purchase of monopolies; especially on pepper, which led to the emergence of a group of elite capitalists in Travancore. It included not only Nairs but some other communities such as Syrian Christians, Nadars and Muslims. Those wealthy Nairs looked forward to collect more profit and they were never ready to return to their old militia life.

In some extend, the traditional Nairs themselves were responsible for the decline of the militia system. Their caste pride, racial prejudice, professional prejudice, prejudice in the populace, over confidence, jealous mentality, disunity etc paved the way for the disintegration of the Nair militia system from the soil of Travancore⁴⁵. The Nairs followed caste discrimination among themselves and the high caste Nairs considered the low caste Nairs as inferior and never made close contact with them. They considered other occupational groups as unclean or polluted class. This kind of narrow attitude, blind beliefs etc also created a favourable background for the degeneration of the traditional Nair militia system. The unrestrained power of the Nairs had gone forever and never came back⁴⁶. Thus the second half of the 18th century witnessed the decline of the socio-political and military domination of the Nair community in Travancore.

End Notes

- 1 K.P. Padmanabha Menon; *History of Kerala*, Vol.III, (New Delhi, Asian Educational Services, 2001), P.166.
- 2 V.Nagam Aiya; *The Travancore State Manual*, Vol. II, (Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1989), P. 347.
- 3 K.Rajasekharan; *History of Social Change among the Nairs in Kerala 1880-1970*, University of Kerala, Karyavattom, (TVM, 1994), P.18.
- 4 A.K.B. Pillai; *The Culture of Social Stratification/Sexism the Economic, Politics and Rituals of Marriage*, Copley publishing group, (Acton Massachusetts, 1987), P.55.
- 5 Elamkulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai; *Studies in Kerala History*, National Book Stall, (Kottayam, 1970), P.325.
- 6 George Wood Cock; *Kerala A Portrait of the Malabar Coast*, (Faber and Faber, London, 1967), p.60.
- 7 Pattom G. Ramachandran Nair; *Nair Samudayathinte Ithihasam* (Mal), Sahitya Vedi, (TVM, 1987), p.39. In the hirannya gharbham ceremony, a Nair who wanted to be Kshatriya should enter the image of a cow which was made up of gold, and came out of it. It meant that the golden cow delivered the person. Thus that person became a Kshatriya.
- 8 K.P. Padmanabha Menon; *History of Kerala*, Vol.III, (New Delhi, Asian Educational Services, 2001), P.161.
9. K.M. Panikkar ; *Some Aspects of Nair Life*, Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute, Vol.XLVIII, P.257.
10. Robin Jeffery ; *The Decline of Nair Dominance, Society and Politics in Travancore 1847-1908*. (New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1976), P.16.
11. T.K.Velupillai; *The Travancore State Manual*, Vol.II, (TVM, Kerala, State gazateer Department, 1940), P.240. When Marthanda Varma ascended the throne, his cousin brothers named Pappu Thampi and Raman Thampi, the children of late Maharajah, tried their maximum to recapture the throne. But Marthanda Varma suppressed them.
12. Mark De Lannoy; *Kulasekhara Perumals of Travancore from 1671-1758* (Netherland, Research School CNWS, Leiden, 1997). P.150. Annavy was a royal title which literally meant 'elder brother'. They were mostly of Nair origin and employed in the diplomatic trade negotiations with East India Company.
13. P.Shungoony Menon; *History of Travancore from the earliest times*, Asian Educational Services, (New Delhi, 1985), P. 141.
14. V.Nagam Aiya; Vol.I, op.cit.p.354.
15. D' Lannoy was the Dutch Captain who was captured by Marthanda Varma in the Colachel war (10th August 1741). Later he was appointed as the chief of the Travancore army.
16. T.K. Velupillai; op.cit.P.269.

17 Pully means battalion and the term pattalam indicate soldiers. Therefore, pullypattalam means battalion of soldiers.

18 C.J. Fuller ; *The Nayars Today*, (London, Cambridge University, 1976), P.42

19 K.M. Panikker ; *History of Kerala 1498-1801*, (Annamala University, 1959). P.408.

20 C.J.Fuller; op.cit.P.42.

21 Robin Jeffery; op.cit.P.4.

22 P.Shungoony Menon; op.cit.P.141.

23 *Visscher-Letter No XX, Churchill's collection of voyages and travels*; Vol.I, Letter from Malabar to Madras, 1862, Pp. 235-236.

24 Janmon rights mean the hereditary land rights possessed by the Nair nobles through matrilineal system.

25 C.J.Fuller; op.cit.P.42.

26 Robin Jeffrey; op.cit.P.3.

27 Cher' in Malayalam means 'mud' makkal means people. Here chermakkal means "sons of the soil" or peasants.

28 William Logan; *Malabar Manual*, Vol.I, (Kerala Gazetters Department, TVM, 2000), Pp.413- 414.

29 Dharma Raja was the second king of Travancore (1758 to 1798 AD). V. Nagam Aiya; Vol. II, op. cit.P.343.

30 Buchanan; *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, Vol.I, (London, 1807), P.366

31. Kerala History Association; *Kerala History* (Mal), Vol. I, (Ernakulam 1973), P.247.

32 Aiyappan Marthanda Pillai was the Dalawa of Travancore from 1758 to 1763 AD. Raja Kesavadas also served as the Sarvadhikariakar (Chief Minister) of Marthanda Varma. He was a talented administrator. Captain D'Lannoy was the Valikappithan or commander in chief of Travancore standing army. He died in 1777 AD and was buried at Udayagiri in Kanyakumari district. V.Nagam Aiya; Vol.I, op.cit.Pp.370- 385.

33. *Anjengo Factory Records*; Vol.XX, p.21. State Archives Tamil Nadu.

34. Sobhanan .B., *Dewan Velu Tampi and the British*, (TVM Kerala Historical Society, 1978), P. 46.

35. *Bombay commissioner's Diary*; Minutes of 2nd June 1792, Serial No. 1661, P.151, State Archives Tamil Nadu.

36 *Journal of Kerala Studies*; Vol.VI, part I, (TVM, March –June 1979), P.347.

37. Lewin B Bowring; *Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan*, Oxford Clarendon Press, (London, 1899), Pp.139-144.

38. Sambandham system was a kind of mock marriage, only intended for sexual exploitation.

39. Samuel Mateer; *Native Life in Travancore*, (W.H.Allen & Co London, 1883), P.304.

40. K.K.Kusuman; *Slavery in Travancore*, Kerala Historical Society, (TVM, 1973), P.48. V.Nagam Aiya; Vol. II, op.cit.p.465.
41. *English Records; Dewan's letter to the Resident*, dated 17th August 1855, document No XXIV, Directorate of Archives Thiruvananthapuram.
42. J.W. Gladstone; *Protestant Christianity and Peoples Movement in Kerala 1850-1936*, (TVM Seminary Publication, 1984), P.96. V.M. Premnath; *Keralathile Adimakal* (Mal), Current Books, (Trichur, 1966), Pp.83-86.
43. *The Travancore govt's English records*; H.N. Read, the Principal to Rama Rao; Coverfile No.1744, Directorate of Archives Thiruvananthapuram.
44. C.J. Fuller; op.cit.p.129.
45. P.Bhaskaranunni; *Pathonpatham Noottandile Keralam* (Mal), (Thrichur Kerala sahitya academy, 1986), P.784.
46. K.M. Panikkar; *History of Kerala*, op.cit.P.306.

