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## VEERA MANGAI VELUNACHIYAR IN ANTIQUITY TAMIL NADU (1772–1780)

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### Abstract

*History books normally center on the activities and achievements of the kings of India, overlooking the accomplishments of the queens. The main reason for this is the consorts of the rulers were usually not associated with the actual administration of the kingdom except perhaps in a few cases. Some names of queens who were actively involved in administrative activities are available from the inscriptions of their times. Most of the queens were, however not involved in the day-to-day affairs of the kingdom, but were active in the religious and cultural spheres and their names are remembered even today in this context. The sculptures of many of the queens are seen in various temples, especially in Tamil Nadu, standing with intense devotion with folded palms, praying to the deities. In India, when monarchy was ruling the roost centuries ago, the ruling class was dominated by males. We seldom ever heard of women taking active role in the area of administration with some exceptions like Jansi Rani Lakshmi Bai (1828–1858) and equally famous 18th - century Indian queen from Sivaganga, Tamil Nadu. Rani Velu Nachiyar (1760-1790) was the first queen to fight against the British in India, even preceding the famous Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi. Prior to these courageous women, circumstances forced yet another brave woman to take the reins of administration of a strife-ridden kingdom and successfully groomed it and regained the lost glory. Hence, the present study focuses on Arc-Veera Mangai Velunachiyar in Antiquity India and study based on secondary sources of data collection.*

**Keywords:** Kingdom Administration, Religious & Cultural Spheres and Strife-Ridden Kingdom.

### Introduction

Sivaganga (also called Sivagangai) is a town and headquarters of the Sivaganga district in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It is also the headquarters of the Sivaganga Taluk. The town is located at a distance of 48 km (30 mi) from Madurai and 449 km (279 mi) from the state capital Chennai. Sivaganga Kingdom was founded by Sasivarna Periya Oodaya Thevar in 1730. The town was subsequently ruled by his successors and ultimately by Velu Nachiyar under the stewardship of Maruthu Pandiyar. They were against the British Empire, but ultimately lost to them in 1790. The Company appointed Gowry Vallaba Periya Oodaya Thevar as the Zamindar of Sivaganga in 1801, whose successors continued with chaos until India's independence in

1947. It was under Ramnad district until 1984 and subsequently a part of the newly formed Sivaganga district. The town is known for agriculture, metal working and weaving.

The region around Sivaganga has considerable mineral deposits. Sivaganga is administered by a municipality established in 1965. As of 2011, the municipality covered an area of 6.97 km<sup>2</sup> (2.69 sq mi) and had a population of 40,403. Sivaganga comes under the Sivaganga assembly constituency which elects a member to the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly once every five years and it is a part of the Sivaganga constituency which elects its Member of Parliament (MP) once in five years. Roadways are the major mode of transportation to the town and it also has rail connectivity. The nearest seaport, Thoothukudi Port, is located 189 km (117 mi) from Sivaganga, while the nearest airport, Madurai International Airport, is located 53 km (33 mi) from the town.

### **Position of Queens of South India**

The queens of the Chalukyas of Badami (Karnataka) issued royal records, administered some of the divisions of their empire and donated to charity. Vijayabhaktarika was the senior queen (pattamahishi) of Chandraditya Prithivivallabha Maharaja who was the elder brother of Vikramaditya I and ruled over a part of the Chalukyan kingdom in the 7th century A.D. She was a talented poetess and has been identified by some scholars with Vijayanka, a great literary figure of those times. Another Chalukyan queen who deserves mention is Lokamahadevi the queen of Vikramaditya II who assisted her husband in the building of the Siva temple at Pattadakal in the 8th century A.D.

**Queens of South India** Among the Pallava queens, the name of Charudevi stands out as she is mentioned as the wife of the heir - apparent (Tuva Maharaja) Buddhavarman andas having issued an inscription in her own name, recording the donation of land to a Vishnu temple in the 4th century A.D. There were many other Pallava queens like Rangapataka, the favourite consort of Rajasimha Pallava, who was associated with the construction of the famous Kailasanatha temple in Kanchipuram in the 8th century A.D. The queens of the Chalukyas of Kalyani were also active in the sphere of administration. The names of Mailaladevi who was ruling in 1053 A.D., Ketaladevi II who was ruling in 1054 A.D. and several others are well-known.

The Chola queens did not participate in administration, but their involvement in the cultural arena was so great that their names will forever be remembered in this regard. Almost all the queens of this dynasty contributed wholeheartedly to the construction of temples in the Chola land and made generous contributions for daily worship and the organization of religious festivals. Their names and the donations which they made are inscribed on the walls of many of the temples.

The names that stand out in this regard are Sembian Mahadevi (Madevi), the widow of Gandaraditya and Kundavai, the sister of Rajaraja Chola I. Rajaraja I named his daughter after his sister and she was married to the Eastern Chalukyan king Vimaladitya. Their son Rajaraja Narendra married his cousin Ammangadevi, the daughter of Rajendra Chola I and their son was the famous Chola king Kulottungal. The name of the brave Kakatiya queen, Rudramba, who ruled over a vast empire in medieval Andhra Pradesh, will ever be remembered by students of South Indian history. Some names of queens of the Vijayanagara monarchs are available from the inscriptions which they have left behind. Two of the queens of Krishnadeva Raya were Tirumala Devi and Chinna Devi.

They accompanied him to the temple of Lord Venkateswara at Tirumala (Tirupati) and presented many expensive gifts to this deity. The exquisite life-size bronze images of the three of them can be seen even today inside this temple complex. One of the queens of Achyuta Raya, the successor of Krishnadeva Raya, was Oduva Tirumalamba, a Sanskrit scholar and poetess who authored Varadambika Parinayam.

### **Indian Joan of Arc-Veera Mangai Velunachiyar**

Veera Mangai Velunachiyar was one of the queens in the 18th century in South India. She rebelled against the British Empire and fought for the freedom of India. She was born in 1730 AD to the Mannar Sellamuthu Sethupathy and to Rani Sakandhimuthal of Ramnad Kingdom. She was the only daughter of this Royal family. The Royal couple had no male heir.

The royal family brought up the Princess, Velunachiyar, like Prince of Ramnad due to this reason. She was trained in the skills of using weapons and also in martial arts like Valari, sticks fighting etc. She learnt horse riding and archery earlier. The Royal couple had engaged teachers to teach her many languages like French, English and Urdu. Thus this young brave Princess had excellent training in all war techniques. She was a scholar in many languages and was ready to rule the Ramnad Kingdom. She married Sivagangai Mannar Muthuvaduganathar at the age of sixteen. In the year 1772, the English invaded her kingdom. Velu Nachiyar heard that her husband Raja Muthu Vaduganathar and her daughter young Princess Gowri Nachiyar were killed in Kalaiyar Koil war.

This war was held in Kalaiyar Koil palace. British troops attacked the palace under the command of Lt.Col. Bon Jour. She was very much worried and wanted to take revenge. Dalavay Thandavaraya Pillai and Maruthu brothers sustained injuries. They promised to recapture the samasthan to punish the English. Dalavay Thandavaraya Pillai, an incredible and distinguished person was the most powerful administrator in Sivagangai samasthanam. Thandavaraya Pillai, the loyalist served (1700-1773) as Palavay and also as Pirathani under the three rulers of Sivagangai samasthanam. He was responsible for the development of Sivagangai samasthanam. At first he served the King Sasivarna Periya Udaiya Thevar during 1730-1750. Later he served under Muthu Vaduganatha Thevar, the King during 1750-1772. He also served as Pirathani to the queen Rani Velu Nachiyar. Here Dalavay means military chief and the Pirathani means chief minister. Pirathani was responsible for the improvement of Foreign affairs. Thus the two charges were the most important and also powerful. (Thandavaraya Pillai was the son of Kathavaraya Pillai who was an accountant and also as Karvar, (administrator) in this samasthan.

He rendered his service with loyalty from the beginning of this samasthanam. He administered well and helped in the development. The King Udaiya Thevar was very much pleased because of his good administration and granted him his hereditary management. It shows the significance of loyalty of Dalavay Thandavaraya Pillai. He advised Veera Mangal Velu Nachiyar to move to different places often in order to avoid British invaders. Meanwhile Dalavay Thandavarayan Pillai wrote a letter to Sultan Hyder Ali on behalf of Velu Nachiyar to provide 5000 infantry and 5000 cavalry to defeat the British army. But unfortunately he passed away due to old age. She decided to meet Hyder Ali after the demise of Dalavay Thandavarayan Pillai at Mysore with the help of his son. She could explain in detail in Urdu all her problems with East India Company.

She explained him her strong opposition of British regime. Hyder Ali was very much pleased and promised to help her in this conflict. He accepted her request with sympathy and provided the necessary military assistance. He ordered Syed Karki of Dindigul fort gladar to provide the required military equipments to Rani Velu Nachiyar. He released 5000 infantry and 5000 cavalry to Rani Velu Nachiyar immediately. Her troops advanced to Sivaganga with the help provided by Maruthu brothers. The Nawab of Arcot put so many hindrances to avoid the advancement of Rani Velu Nachiyar's combined troops. The queen and Maruthu brothers overcame all hurdles. They geared up the troops and entered Sivaganga. She defeated the Nawab of Arcot and took him as a captivator.

She re-captured her Sivaganga samsthan with the help of Hyder Ali and crowned as queen of the Sivagangai Seemai. Velu Nachiyar is only the first queen who raised the revolt against the British emperor. According to historians Prof. Sanjeevi mentioned in his 'Maruthiruvar' book that 'the bravery queen Velu Nachiyar raised revolt against English emperor and fought for the freedom of India 85 years before Jhansi Rani's freedom struggle in North. Venkatam further stated that Velu Nachiyar is India's Joan of Arc.

### **Arc-Veera Mangai Velu Nachiyar's History**

The Kingdom of Ramnad originally comprised the territories of Ramnad, Sivagangai and Pudukottai of today. Raghunatha Sethupathy alias Kilavan Sethupathy, the 7th King of Ramnad reigned between 1674 and 1710. Kilavan Sethupathy, came to know of the bravery and valour of Peria Oodayan of Nalukottai, 4 kilometres from Sholapuram, near Sivagangai. *Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathy*

The King assigned to Peria Oodaya Thevar of Nalukottai a portion of land sufficient to maintain 1000 armed men. Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathy became the 8th King of Ramnad in 1710 after the death of Kilavan Sethupathy. The King gave in marriage his daughter Akilandeshwari Nachiyar, to Sasivarna Thevar, the son of Nalukottai Peria Oodaya Thevar. The King gave Sasivarna Thevar lands as dowry, free of taxation, sufficient to maintain 1,000 men. He placed him in charge of the fortresses of Piranmalai, Tiruppathur, Sholapuram and Tiruppuvanam as well as the harbour of Thondi.

Meanwhile Bhavani Sankaran, the son of Kilavan Sethupathy conquered Ramnad territory and arrested Sundareswara Regunatha Sethupathy, the 9th King of Ramnad. Bhavani Sankaran proclaimed himself as the Rajah of Ramnad. He became the 10th king of Ramnad and he reigned from 1726 to 1729. He quarrelled with Sasivarna Peria Oodaya Thevar of Nalukottai and drove him out of his Nalukottai palayam. Kattaya Thevar, the brother of the late Sundareswara Raghunatha Sethupathy fled from Ramnad and sought refuge with the Rajah of Tanjore Tuljaji. While Sasivarna Thevar was passing through the jungles of Kalayarkoi, he met a gnani (sage) named Sattappiah, who was performing Thapas (meditation) under a jambul tree near a spring called Sivaganga. The deposed king prostrated himself before him and narrated all the previous incidents of his life.

The Gnani whispered a certain mantra in his ears (Mantra Opadesam) and advised him to go to Tanjore and kill a ferocious tiger, which was kept by the Rajah especially to test the bravery of men. Sasivarna Thevar went to Tanjore. There he became acquainted with Kattaya Thevar a refugee like himself. Satisfied with the good behaviour of Sasivarna Thevar and Kattaya Thevar, the Rajah of Tanjore wanted to help them to regain the States again, ordered his Dalavoy to go with a large army to invade Bhavani Sankarathevar. Sasivarna



Thevar and Kattaya Thevar at once proceeded to Ramnad with a large army furnished by the king of Tanjore. They defeated Bhavani Sankara Thevar at the battle of Uraiur and captured Ramnad in 1730. Thus Kattaya Thevar became the 11th King of Ramnad.

She was the princess of Ramanathapuram and the daughter of Chellamuthu Sethupathy. She married the king of Siva Gangai and they had a daughter - Vellachi Nachiyar. When her husband Muthuvaduganathaperiya Udaiyathevar was killed, she was drawn into battle. Her husband and his second wife were killed by a few British soldiers and the son of the Nawab of Arcot. She escaped with her daughter, lived under the protection of Hyder Ali at Virupachi near Dindigul for eight years. During this period she formed an army and sought an alliance with Gopala Nayaker and Hyder Ali with the aim of attacking the British. In 1780 Rani Velu Nachiyar fought the British and won the battle. When Velu Nachiyar finds the place where the British stock their ammunition, she builds the first human bomb.

A faithful follower, Kuyili douses herself in oil, lights herself and walks into the storehouse. Rani Velu Nachiyar formed a woman's army named "Udaiyaal" in honour of her adopted daughter Udaiyaal, who died detonating a British arsenal. Nachiyar was one of the few rulers who regained her kingdom and ruled it for 10 more years. Velu Nachiyar is the first queen who fought for the freedom against British in India and gave them a free run for their life. The first revolutionary who opposed the rule of British in Tamil Nadu even before the Sepoy mutiny which is considered as the first war against the British rule in India. The Queen Velu Nachiyar granted powers to Marudu brothers to administer the country in 1780. Velu Nachiyar died a few years later, but the exact date of her death is not known (it was about 1790). Marudu brothers are the sons of Udayar Servai alias Mookiah Palaniappan Servai and Anandayer alias Ponnathal.

### **Timeline of Sivagangai Empire**

#### ***1<sup>st</sup> Raja Sasivarna Thevar (1730–1750)***

Kattaya Thevar divided Ramnad into five parts and retained three for him. He granted the two parts to Sasivarna Thevar of Nalukottai conferring on him the title of "Rajah Muthu Vijaya Regunatha Peria Oodaya Thevar".

#### ***2<sup>nd</sup> Raja Muthu Vaduganatha Thevar (1750–1772)***

Sasivarna Peria Oodaya Thevar died in or about the year 1750. He was succeeded by his only son Muthu Vaduganatha Thevar. He was the second Rajah of Sivagangai. His wife Rani Velu Nachiyar acted as "friend, philosopher and guide" to him. Tandavaraya Pillai was the able minister of Sivagangai. Muthu Vaduganatha Thevar granted commercial facilities to the Dutch only after the British rejected a similar offer, made to Colonel Heron. Further the aim of the British was to oblige the ruler of Sivaganga to serve the Nawab or to pay tribute to him or to dissuade them from establishing relations with foreign powers like the Dutch.

A two pronged offensive was made by the British. Joseph Smith from the east and Benjour from the west invaded Sivaganga Palayam in June 1772. The country was full of bushes of cockspur thorn, though there were villages and open spaces here and there. Rajah Muthu Vaduganatha Thevar, in anticipation of the invasion, erected barriers on the roads, dug trenches and established posts in the woods of Kalayarkoil. On the 21st of June 1772 the detachment of Smith and Benjour joined forces and occupied the town of Sivaganga.

The next day, the British forces marched to Kalayarkoil and captured the post of Keeranoor and

Sholapuram. Now, Benjour continuing the operations came into conflict with the main body of the troops of Sivaganga on the 25th June 1772. Muthu Vaduganatha Rajah with many of his followers fell dead in that heroic battle. The heroic activities shown in the battle field by Velu Nachiyar is praised by the historians. The widow queen Velu Nachiyar and daughter Vellachi Nachiyar with Tandavaraya Pillai fled to Virupakshi in Dindigul. Later they were joined by the two able Servaigarars Vellai Marudhu and Chinna Marudhu.

### ***3rd Rani Velu Nachiyar (1772–1780)***

Rani Velu Nachiyar and her daughter Vellachi Nachiyar lived under the protection of Hyder Ali at Virupakshi near Dindigul. Frustrated by the joining of forces against him, the Nawab ordered that Velu Nachiyar and the Marudhu brothers were permitted to return to Sivaganga to rule the country subject to payment of Kist to the Nawab. Abiding by this Order, Rani Velu Nachiyar accompanied by the Marudhu brothers and Vellachi Nachiyar entered Sivaganga. An agreement was reached whereby Rani Velu Nachiyar was permitted to govern the Sivaganga Country and Chinna Marudhu, the younger was appointed her minister and the elder Vellai Marudhu as the Commander-in-chief. Thus the widow Queen Velu Nachiyar succeeded her husband in 1780.

### ***Marudhu Brothers (1748–1801)***

The Queen Velu Nachiyar granted powers to the Marudhu brothers to administer the country in 1780. Velu Nachiyar died a few years later, but the exact date of her death is not known (it was about 1790). The Marudhu brothers were the sons of Udayar Servai alias Mookiah Palaniappan Servai and Anandayer alias Ponnathal. They were from Kongulu Street of Ramnad. They belonged neither to the family of the ancient poligars nor to their division of the caste. Servaikaran was the caste title and Marudhu the family name.

The Marudhu brothers served under Muthu Vaduganathan. Later they were elevated to the position of commanders. Two forms of the boomerang were used in India. These weapons were commonly made of wood. It was crescent-shaped, one end being heavier than the other, and the outer edge was sharpened. Their name in Tamil is 'valari' stick. It is said that the Marudhu brothers were experts in the art of throwing the valari stick. It is said that Marudhus used the valari in the Poligar wars against the British. The Marudhu brothers with 12,000 armed men surrounded Sivaganga and plundered the Nawab's territories.

The Nawab on the 10th of March 1789 appealed to the Madras Council for aid. On 29 April 1789, the British forces attacked Kollangudi. They were defeated by a large body of Marudhu's troops. He was in close association with Veera Pandiya Kattabomman of Panchalankurichi. Kattabomman held frequent consultations with Marudhus. After the execution of Kattabomman in 17 October 1799 at Kayattar, Chinna Marudhu gave asylum to Kattabomman's brother Oomadurai (dumb brother). He issued an epoch-making Jumboo Deweepa proclamation to the people in the island of Jamboo to fight against the British whether they were Hindus, Mussalamans or Christians. At last the Marudhu Pandiyars fell victim to the cause of liberating the motherland from the British supremacy. Marudhu Pandiyan, the popular leader of the rebels, together with his gallant brother Vellai Marudhu were executed on the ruins of the fort at Tiruppathur in Sivaganga District on 24 October 1801. They showed their determination and spirit at the outset of the final struggle of 1801 by setting their handsome village Siruvayal on fire to prevent its being made use of by the British forces.

The Marudhu brothers were not only warriors noted for bravery, but were great administrators. During the period from 1783 to 1801, they worked for the welfare of the people and the Sivaganga Seemai was reported to be fertile. They constructed many notable temples and churches in the area of Sivagangai also a few notable places like Kalayar Kovil Marudhu Temple, Pallithammam Moovarasar Church with many Ooranis and Tanks. After so many successions of legal heirs had ruled the estate, lastly Sri D. S. Karthikeya Venkatachalapathy Rajah succeeded to the estate of the late Sri. D. Shanmuga Rajah and he was the Hereditary Trustee of Sivaganga. Devasthanam and Chatrams consisted of 108 temples, 22 Kattalais and 20 Chatrams.

Sri. D.S. Karthikeya Venkatachalapathy Rajah died on 30 August 1986, leaving a daughter named Tmt.. Maduranthagi Nachiyar as his heir. At present, Tmt. Maduranthagi Nachiyar administers the Sivaganga Estate, Sivaganga Devasthanam and Chatram of Sivaganga Royal Family. Based on the "District Gazette" 1990 of Ramanathapuram, and the history of Sivaganga maintained by Samasthanam, Sivaganga District has been formed mostly with an area of entire Sivaganga Zamin and part of Ramnad Zamin. The nearest towns include Ilaiyangudi, Ramanathapuram, and Sivagangai.

### **First Human Bomb**

In 1780 Rani Velu Nachiyar attacked the British settlements in a lightning speed. She developed a separate well trained women's army whose members were equally brave, patriotic and disciplined. In the battle, upon finding the ammunition depot, Velu Nachiyar had her first human bomb a dedicated woman warrior by the name of "Kuyili," carry out the difficult job. That brave, young woman, after dousing herself with inflammable oil, walked into the arsenal and lit herself. Seconds later the entire place was ablaze.

There was nothing but destruction and chaos all around. After this humiliating defeat by an army led by a dynamic, woman warrior, the British left the place for good, never to turn back. This patriotic young woman, who was a human bomb, sacrificed her precious life for the freedom of her mother land from foreign rulers. Velu Nachiyar, as a ruler kept the woman's army and named it "Udaiyaal" in honor of her adopted daughter Udaiyaal, who died detonating a British arsenal at the battle. Her courageous exploits against the British company took place long before the Sepoy mutiny of 1857. Queen Velu Nachiyar found successors in Marudu brothers who were equally competent to administer the country in 1780. Velu Nachiyar died after a few years later. Her date of death was not well recorded. Indian Stamps-Rani Velu Nachiyar-By India Post Nation paid tributes to her by issuing a commemorative postage stamp on 31st December, 2008.

### **Conclusion**

One may recall what Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi once wrote on women power in his weekly journal 'Young India'. "To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to women. If by strength is meant moral power then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self sacrificing has her not greater power of endurance, and has she not greater courage?" "Yes, Rani Nachiyar lived a life true to what father of the nation said one and half century later!

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