



The Western Poligars Under Nelkattanseval: A Historical Analysis Of Power, Resistance, And Colonial Encounter (1750–1800)

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the history, administration, and resistance of the Western Poligars under the leadership of Nelkattanseval during the eighteenth century. The Poligar (Palaiyakkarar) system constituted a distinctive feudal-military structure under Nayak and later Nawab rule. Nelkattanseval emerged as a principal stronghold of the Western Poligars, particularly during colonial conflicts and resistance to British expansion. Drawing upon primary sources, colonial records, McKenzie manuscripts, and modern scholarly works, the study traces the socio-political trajectory of the Poligars with special reference to their martial traditions, agrarian control, and participation in the South Indian Rebellion. The paper contributes to a deeper understanding of regional resistance, indigenous governance, and colonial transformation in South India.

KEYWORDS: Poligars, Nelkattanseval, Tirunelveli, Palaiyakkarar, Colonial Resistance, South Indian Rebellion, Nayak Rule, Nawabs of Arcot, British Colonialism

1. INTRODUCTION

The Western Poligars (Palaiyakkarars) represented a distinctive socio-political and military system in South India that flourished under the Nayak rulers and later came into conflict with British colonial interests. Among them, the Poligars of Nelkattanseval, located in the present-day Tirunelveli district, played a crucial role in resisting British expansion during the late eighteenth century. This paper examines the rise, governance, conflicts, and eventual decline of the Western Poligars under Nelkattanseval, situating their experience within the broader historical processes of regional resistance and colonial conquest.

2. THE POLIGAR SYSTEM IN SOUTH INDIA

2.1 Origins of the Palaiyakkarar System

The Poligar or Palaiyakkarar system originated under the Vijayanagara Empire during the sixteenth century and was further developed by the Nayaks of Madurai. Under this system, land was divided into palaiyams (military fiefs) and granted to chieftains who were responsible for maintaining armed forces, defending territorial boundaries, and remitting tribute to the overlord.

2.2 Structure and Duties

The Poligars enjoyed semi-autonomous authority. They collected revenue, administered local justice, maintained military forces, and ensured regional security. Their authority combined feudal privileges with martial power, creating a system that was both administrative and military in character.

Sources:

K. Rajayyan, Rise and Fall of the Poligars of Tamil Nadu

Burton Stein, Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India

3. GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF WESTERN TAMIL NADU AND NELKATTANSEVAL

3.1 Geographic and Strategic Importance

Western Tamil Nadu, particularly the Tirunelveli region, was bounded by the Western Ghats and possessed fertile plains along with forest resources. Nelkattanseval, located in rugged terrain, offered natural advantages for fortification and guerrilla warfare, making it a strategic centre of resistance.

3.2 Political Transition from Nayaks to Nawabs

Following the decline of the Madurai Nayaks in the early eighteenth century, political authority passed nominally to the Nawabs of Arcot. However, effective control remained weak, allowing the Poligars to assert autonomy, which resulted in frequent confrontations.

References:

T. V. Mahalingam, Administration and Social Life under Vijayanagar

R. Sathianathaier, Nayaks of Madura

4. NELKATTANSEVAL POLIGARS: ORIGINS AND RISE TO PROMINENCE

4.1 The Lineage of Nelkattanseval

The rulers of Nelkattanseval traced their lineage to warrior families loyal to the Nayaks. Figures such as Kattabomman Nayak and his associates emerged as prominent leaders of resistance. Their strong fortifications, military discipline, and local legitimacy enabled them to exercise significant regional influence.

4.2 Political Alliances and Rivalries

The Poligars of Nelkattanseval formed alliances with neighbouring Poligars such as Ettayapuram, Panchalankurichi, and Sivagiri. At the same time, internal rivalries sometimes weakened collective resistance, reflecting the complexity of local politics.

5. ADMINISTRATION AND SOCIAL ORDER UNDER THE POLIGARS

5.1 Revenue and Agrarian System

Revenue collection was carried out through village officials such as karnams. The Poligars maintained irrigation facilities including tanks and channels. Major crops included rice, millets, and cotton, with taxation often collected in kind.

5.2 Caste and Community

Martial communities such as the Maravars and Thevars formed the backbone of Poligar military power. Temple patronage and caste leadership played a significant role in legitimizing Poligar authority.

5.3 Judicial and Policing Functions

Justice was administered locally by Poligars or village assemblies. Despite the militaristic nature of their rule, they maintained law and order through kinship and clan networks.

References:

S. Kathirvel, A History of the Maravars

McKenzie Manuscripts (c. 1800), British Library Archives

6. POLIGAR RESISTANCE AND WARFARE (1750–1800)

6.1 Early Confrontations with Nawabs and the British

From the mid-eighteenth century, the Poligars resisted attempts by the Nawabs to centralize revenue. British intervention intensified these conflicts as the East India Company sought direct administrative and military control.

6.2 Military Tactics and Fortification

The Poligars employed stone forts, hill terrain, and irregular warfare tactics. Nelkattanseval's fort was strategically positioned to withstand prolonged sieges.

6.3 British Expeditions and Response

British forces led by officers such as Colonel Fullarton, Captain Campbell, and Major Bannerman conducted military campaigns against the Poligars. Diplomatic efforts failed, resulting in sieges and violent suppression.

Sources:

Select Committee Reports on East India Affairs, Vol. V (1801)

R. Caldwell, A History of Tinnevely

7. NELKATTANSEVAL'S ROLE IN THE SOUTH INDIAN REBELLION (1799–1801)

7.1 Coalition of Poligars

After the execution of Kattabomman and the death of Tipu Sultan, over seventy Poligars united against British authority. Nelkattanseval served as a centre for refuge, arms, and manpower.

7.2 Campaigns and Key Battles

British forces launched coordinated attacks on rebel strongholds. Although the Poligars achieved temporary successes, superior British resources ultimately prevailed.

7.3 Capture and Aftermath

The fall of Nelkattanseval marked a decisive turning point. Many Poligars were captured, exiled, or executed, and their territories were annexed.

8. BRITISH SUPPRESSION AND THE DECLINE OF POLIGAR POWER

8.1 Abolition of the Poligar System

After 1801, the British abolished the Poligar system and introduced the Ryotwari settlement. Former Poligars were reduced to zamindars or pensioners.

8.2 Administrative and Social Changes

Colonial reforms dismantled traditional military and administrative structures, leading to social and economic decline among dependent communities.

References:

K. Rajayyan, South Indian Rebellion

Nicholas Dirks, The Hollow Crown

9. LEGACY AND HISTORICAL MEMORY OF THE WESTERN POLIGARS

9.1 Oral Traditions and Ballads

Oral traditions and folk songs in Tirunelveli continue to celebrate the bravery of Nelkattanseval's warriors.

9.2 Monuments and Memorials

Forts and memorials associated with the Poligars have been preserved as heritage sites, with annual commemorations.

9.3 Contemporary Relevance

In modern Tamil Nadu, the Poligars symbolize early anti-colonial resistance and regional pride.

10. CONCLUSION

The Western Poligars under Nelkattanseval constituted a powerful regional force combining indigenous governance, militarism, and resistance. Their defeat reflects the broader transformation of South India under colonial rule. Nevertheless, their legacy endures as a symbol of courage and resistance in Tamil historical memory.

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