

VILLAGE ADMINISTRATION IN NANCHILNADU UNDER THE REIGN OF TRAVANCORE – A STUDY

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Abstract

Nanchilnadu as a part of the land which was under the influence of the Venad kings for many epochs. It was considered as a cock-pit of warfare, because of its fertility, natural barriers fortifying the land on all sides, the debris of a majestic forts attracted the Pandyas, Cholas and Vijayanagar rulers. This research paper seeks to unravel the systematic village administration in Nanchilnadu under the Travancore kings. Many old documents, records, royal writs, Travancore Archaeological Series collected from Central Record Office and Central Library, Trivandrum which are helpful to reconstruct the administrative efficiency of the Venad rulers.

Keywords: Village administration, Land revenue, Taluks, Travancore kings, Temple festival

Introduction

The people of Nanchilnadu lived in small villages. The village constituted the smallest unit of administration. The people of the villages were more or less left to themselves in administrative matters, for the kings did not interfere in village administration except in times of serious crime or rebellion in the country.

It is seen from records¹ that Nanchilnadu was broadly divided to Tenmiti and Vadamiti and these two divisions comprised twelve Pidagais². The chief man in a Pidagai was called Pidagai Mudaliyar.³ “The Mudaliyar was given a rod of office with silver knob. It is said that the Mudaliyar exercised civil and criminal jurisdiction over the members of the community in the days of their glory, the Raja reserving to himself the right of trying great and capital causes. They were also given power to impose and remit fines”.⁴ There are records to prove that the Vanigaraman Mudaliyar as representing the people of Nanchilnadu was consulted by the king on many important state affairs. As a mark of special favour, the Mudaliyars were allowed the privilege of riding in palanquins in these days. Tax-free lands were granted for maintaining a palanquin and its bearers. The king granted to the Vairavanan family twenty kottas (a measure of land as well as grain) of paddy field for the maintenance

of a palanquin granted for the family.⁵ They enjoyed the honour of receiving five-hundred panams, a piece of silk, and a *kavain* (fine cotton cloth) from the Travancore king whenever a marriage was celebrated in their family. If the death of the senior member was reported to the palace, a sum of three-hundred panams, a piece of silk and a cotton cloth were sent to his heir as a mark of respect. At times of marriage, death and other ceremonies connected with the palace, the royal house was in the practice of sending nittus (a royal writ or commission) to the Pidagai Mudaliyars.

Functions of Village Assembly(Nattukuttam):

For administrative purposes the people of Nanchilnadu used to hold occasional conference which were known as Nattukuttams (village-assembly). The Mudaliyar, the chairman of the Nattukuttam, guided the proceedings of the assembly. The meetings were announced by tom-toms and bugles throughout the villages. Every individual was bound to give due respect to the resolutions passed in the conference and deterrent punishments were given to those who disobeyed them.

Questions of great importance were discussed in the Nattukuttam by the representatives of the people. On 21st *Kartikai* 776 Malayalam Era / 20th November, 1600 A.D. a royal writ was issued to the Nattars (the people) and Kaniyalars (proprietor of land) of the perumparru (a local denomination of the ryots) and sanketam (area around the temple where immunity for Brahmin prevails from state interference) lands in both the northern and southern divisions of Nanchilnadu, for meeting the expenses connected with the erection of the Kalkulam and Udayagiri forts, the digging of moats (around them), the felling of poles and posts and the buying of palm-leaves for thatching walls. As soon as the people received this communication, the Nattar between Mangalam to Manakkudi met together on 25th November 1600 A.D and decided to pay a nazer every year. But they boldly disapproved of the forced labour and passed a resolution that their servants and slaves be exempted from personal service in connection with the construction of the king's forts.⁶

Between the year 1673 and 1693 A.D. the incursions from Madura became more and more frequent, and resistance on the part of the Rajas became less and less successful. New taxes had to be imposed, which pressed heavily on the people. The greedy officers of revenue and the minions of the yogakkar (member of the council) and pillamar began to coerce the people into making payments of illegal cesses. At length, in 878 M.E/ 1702 A.D., the Nattar assembled at Vadaseri, on the first *Alpasi* (2nd November) and resolved to protest unitedly

against the acts of government which, in their opinion, subjected them to serious troubles and loss.⁷ Assembling once more at Asramam near Nagercoil, on the 14th *Markali* (14th December) they asserted their loyalty to the reigning sovereign, resolved to continue to pay *ancali*,⁸ *Melvaram* but not the unusual tax like *kottappanam*.⁹ The resolution continued, “we should honourably keep up all the privileges or rights which our ancestors enjoyed in olden days”. “in thus asserting our rights”, the resolution added that “if any *pidagai* or village, or any single individual is subjected to loss by the acts of government, we should support them by re-imbursing such loss from our common funds. If at such times any one should get into the secrets of the government and impair the privileges or rights of the country, he should be subjected to a public inquiry by the *Nattars*”.

The assembly again met on the 15th *Vaikasi* 894 M.E./ 13th May, 1718 A.D. at *Isantimangalam*,¹⁰ and reordered a resolution which, after enumerating their troubles, proceeded to say, “though there had been thus numerous kinds of troubles in the country, the *Karyakkars*, (administrative head of a *taluk*) and *Svaruppakkars* (officers) have not, under royal command, redressed our grievances and enabled us to live in peace, we should leave uncultivated the whole country between *Mangalam* and *Manakudi* from the *Kaar* (monsoon) Season of 892 M.E./ 1716 A.D., and if, after that, the *Karyakkars* and *Svaruppakkars*, under command, redress our grievances and enable us to live in peace, we may then cultivate our lands, we should keep up all privileges in the country as in the days of our ancestors. If any in the country gets into the secrets of the Government and undermine the established privileges of the country, we should inquire into the matter and make such persons answer for the same, both as a house (family) and as individual’s personality. While thus managing our affairs, if the country, or any *Pidagai* or village, or any house, become subject to troubles, we should as body, make ourselves strong by making a united stand, and emigrating”.

These resolutions, made binding by “taking oath at the feet of our Lord *Tanumalayapperumal* and our Lord *Bhutanathaswami*”, make it clear that the people of *Nanchilnaduclung* dearly to their rights and privileges, and were prepared to make a bold and united stand to preserve them intact and unimpaired, and they would even go to the extent of migrating rather than submitting to unwarranted impositions. Complaints were heard by the king from the villagers and their legitimate grievances were redressed. When the King *Rama Varma* was in *Darasnamkope* on the 7th *Chittarai* 896 M.E./ 4th April, 1720 A.D., he heard the complaints of the riots, redressed their grievances and ordered them to go to his camp at *Ashramam* near *Suchindrum*.¹¹ While the Christian *Paravas* at *Kumarimuttam* complained of

being harassed by the Hindus of the locality, the King immediately went to their rescue and redressed their grievances. He also gave special protection to them by exempting them from certain oppressive taxes which were forced on them by the village community. A pillar inscription at Kottar bears testimony to the protection offered by the King to the oppressed weavers of Idalakkudi. Another inscription dated 20th of *Aani* 834 M.E./18th June, 1658 A.D. contain an interesting instance. The Sripantaram (exchequer) of the temple of Bhutappandi purchased lands and melvaram (a portion of produce given to the King or Janmi on lease account) rights on mortgage tenures from the villagers and the land was in possession and enjoyment of the same.¹² Subsequently some of the mortgage amounts. They even impeded the temple servants from attending to their business. At about this time Ravi Varma arrived and sojourned in the new palace at Bhutappandi for observing Thinkal Bhajanam in the Siva temple there. The Santikkaras (authorities) and accountants of the temple availed themselves of this opportunity and represented to the sovereign the nature of the situation created by the mortgagors. They also explained of the loss that might happen to the temple revenue, should the mortgagors right of redemption be recognized. The King ordered that no properties other than those mortgaged by the royal treasury should be redeemable and that this rule should not be violated on any account.

Administration in Taluks:

The Pidagai Mudaliyars enjoyed unlimited powers. It was these Mudaliyars assisted by a number of Ambalakarars (temple officials) that collected the revenue from the ryots of Nanchilnadu and paid the same into the royal treasury.¹³ As this system did not work well, the Maharaja consulted the people as to how better revenue administration should be carried on. It may be that it was in furtherance of the above discussion that the government appointed Provertikaras to every village.¹⁴ His office was known as *Proverti Kaccery* (Village Office) which was located in a place accessible to all classes. The Provertikaras kept the details of land-holdings. He recorded the information regarding cultivation and revenue, the transactions made by the villagers and maintained copies of the regulations framed by the rulers from time to time. He was infact the general scribe for the villagers. The Provertikaras stayed within his jurisdiction and as far as possible, near the Poverti Kaccery and went around in official visits to the houses of Pattadars to collect Sirkar Kist (Government taxes) and issue receipts prepared in advance.

Powers and Functions of Village Officer (Provertikars):

The functions developing on the Provertikaras are clearly explained in a varyiola (memo of instruction) dated 29th Tai 929 M.E. / 7th February, 1753 A.D. and the royal writs of the same date issued to the Provertikars in Nanchilnadu in that year,¹⁵ copies of which are found in the Matilakam Records. These records disclose the following interesting facts:

- (1) The Provertikaras was the local officer responsible for the collection of taxes and disbursements of grants sanctioned by the Government.
- (2) All the government Devasvams (temple property) of the village were to be supervised by the Provertikaras. He was to arrange for the proper performance of the Pujas in the temple within his jurisdiction and to appoint Candrakkaran (Manager) for each temple. It was the duty of the Provertikaras to supply provisions for the ulsavam (periodic temple festival) and bhadradipams (a religious ceremony conducted in Makaram and Karkatakam in the temple) in the capital and to obtain receipts from the Candrakkaran of Ulsavamadham.
- (3) In times of drought or blight, the Provertikaras was to inspect the Devasavam (temple/temple property) as well as Pantaravaga (property belonging to the government) lands, along with the Karivu Karattu Pillai, (accountant to assess the extent of failure of crops due to drought) Kelvi Pillai (taluk administrative head) and four assessors. If the ryots were to complain that poor yield had not been justly assessed by the assessor, the Provertikaras was to have the field harvested in the presence of his own men, determine the poor yield and grant any remission due to the ryot.
- (4) The Provertikaras was required to attend to the irrigation works in his village i.e excavation of tanks, conversion of dry lands into wet, and maintenance of channels and anicuts. New lands brought under wet cultivation were to be included under the ayacut (revenue settlement; settlement register) of the respective tanks.
- (5) The village accounts comprised ancali (a tax levied on wet land), melvaram (portion of a produce given to the King on lease account), piravage (extra cess), raksabhogam (protection money) and sancayam (miscellaneous revenue) were prepared by the Provertikaras.
- (6) The Provertikaras was to send up monthly statement the Mantapattumvatukal (taluk) for the receipts and disbursement in his village.

- (7) The Provertikaras was to arrange for the imparting of arms-training to selected trainees of the village by competent instructors and inspect the training every fourth Friday of the month. He was also to arrange for the supply of powder and balls, bows and arrows, and other equipment necessary for the training.
- (8) The village officer had the power to fine persons, upto the limit of nine panams, all cases for higher punishments being sent up to higher authority.
- (9) The Tovalai Provertikaras was to attend to the construction of the Tovalai fort.
- (10) In petty cases the Provertikaras served as judge and magistrate.

Powers and Functions of Administrative Head of Taluk (Karyakkar):

The officer to whom the Provertikaras was subordinate was known as Karyakkar, corresponding to the modern Tahsildar. The duties of the Karyakkar are mentioned in a royal nittu dated 1-1-949 M.E. / 13th August, 1773 A.D. as follows.¹⁶

- (1) To get the revenue in paddy and money, collected by the Provertikaras appointed to the several Proverties;
- (2) To defray the expenses connected with devasvam pujas, Isvaraseva, maintenance of troops and visesal or special items;
- (3) To conduct the prescribed ceremonies in the religious and charitable institutions;
- (4) To get the accounts of receipts and expenditure written up annually by the pillamar (accountants);
- (5) To receive the emoluments attached to the office: and
- (6) To conduct the administration of the Mantapattumvatukkal (taluk) in accordance with the sattavariyola (rules).

The Karyakkars were in charge of Mantapattumvatukkals. They exercised unlimited powers in their taluks. Munro observers: “the strict gradation of authority established among the Karyakkars, and the entire command which they possessed over the services of the people, contributed to perpetuate military feelings in the country, and to facilitates the mean of commotion and insurrection. They were, infact, at once military and civil governors exercising absolute power in their districts”. Their investiture ceremony was marked with the presentation of a sword; and this weapon, together with the ensigns of their office, was carefully displayed wherever they appeared.¹⁷

Functions of other Administrators:

In the exercise of his duties the Provertikaras was assisted by the Kelvi Accountant, Karivukarattukanakkan and Tantalkaras (revenue assistants). The Kelvi Accountants were equally responsible with the Provertikars for the collection of revenue and that any neglect or remissness on their part would entail dismissal from service. His duties are to collect the revenue according to the kists (instalment for the payment of revenue); to supply paddy for the devasvums, Isvarasevas, uttus (offering of food in temples), etc., and for ulsavam (temple festival) and other festivals; to prepare and send rice for such occasions; to distribute among the viruttikars (grant of land tax-free for service to the state; service-tenure – authority) the money-advance received from the taluk for the supply of vegetables and arrange for the supplies being properly made: to look after the government property in his jurisdiction; to furnish necessary information to the taluk subordinates deputed for the assessment of putuvals (newly formed land); to receive applications for karivu, tarisu (land left fallow), alikiccetam (remission on account of loss due to inundation) and take the necessary steps to so register them; to report the death persons without heirs and secure the properties left by the deceased; to render help to travellers and other persons who might seek their aid; to prepare and send up regular accounts relating to receipts and expenditure and other matters; to give information to the Police Officers about the commission of heinous offences; and to examine the cash in the chest and paddy in the granaries up to the date of taking charge and grant receipts for the same.¹⁸

As in the case of village administration, ‘puravu’ (a compact block of wet land under a district irrigation source) administration was also effectively handled.¹⁹ The extensive ‘nanca’ (fertile) lands irrigated by rivers and tanks were called ‘puravus’. Normally this will be found around every village. The expenditure that was incidental to matters of common interest was met from ‘potu mutal’. There were certain rules and practices for every village and those who acted repugnant to them were severely castigated in the conference.

For the protection of the persons and property of the Nanchilnadu ryots from the depredations of the Maravas and other robbers from Pandyanadu, a staff of Desakavalkar was appointed.²⁰ For their services the Desakavalkar (village watchman) were paid in kind by the villagers. They kept watch at night, noted the arrival and departure and observed the movements of strangers. Suspected persons were produced before the local authority for examination. The establishment of village watch and ward proved a great blessing to the

inhabitants. Settlement cases were decided by village arbitrators, and their decision was final.²¹

Conclusion

The credit for initiating a systematic village administration in Nanchilnadu falls to the credit of Venadu rulers. The royal writs and Mittilagam records clearly explained the duties and functions of the village administrators. Travancore rulers village administration was recognised and modernised. The village was made the smallest unit of the administration and was looked by various officials like Provertikaras, Karyakkar and other subordinate officers. Thus, we see that an affluent and well-ordered society conscious of its rights and duties inhabited the land of Nanchilnadu from very early times. The Provertikaras was the chief man of the locality and he attended to all affairs which required the attention of the State at the village level. A group of villages constituted the next higher unit called the Mantapattumvatukkal, which was under the Karyakkar. It appears that the village assemblies managed the village temples; the power to appoint temple accountants and priests and to regulate the system of worship was with them. Also the complaints were heard by the king from the villagers and their legitimate grievances redressed. There were certain rules and practices for every village and those who acted repugnant to them were severely castigated in the village assemblies. The establishment of Desakavalkars in villages proved a great blessing to the inhabitants. No doubt from the above records and documents the people of Nanchilnadu lived a very comfortable life under the Travancore rulers.

Reference

¹Ola document of Kollam 810, No.67 (Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol.V, p.209.).

²An Administrative sub-division of a taluk was known as Pidagai.

³The twelve Pigagais are Melpidagai, Naduppigagai, Anantapuram, Alakiyapandipuram, Tovalapidagai, Talakuddy, Kottarpidagai, Agasteesvarampidagai, Parakkaipidagai, Sucindrampidagai, padapparuppupidagai and Terpidagai.

⁴Padmanabha Menon, K.P., History of Kerala, Vol.II, Ernakulam, 1924, p.521.

⁵Desigavinayagam Pillai, S., 'The Mudaliyar MSS' (Kerala Society Papers, Series VII, p.22.)

⁶Desigavinayagam Pillai, S., 'Ancient Forts at Kalkulam and Udayagiri', (Kerala Society Papers, Series, VI, p.314.)

⁷Ola document of Kollam 878 No.73 (Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol.V, p.216)

⁸This is one kind of a tax levied on wet land in the village administration under the rulers of Travancore.

⁹Ola document of Kollam 889, No.74 (Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol.V, p.219)

¹⁰Isantimangalam Ola document of Kollam 894 No.75, (Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol.V, p.220.)

¹¹Rajaraja Varma Raja, M., 'Some Travancore Dynastic Records' (Kerala Society Paper, Series, VI, p.335.)

¹²TR.S.M., Vol.II, App.Doc.XV, p.13.

¹³Nagam Aiya, V., Travancore State Manual, Vol.II, Trivandrum, 1906, p.379.

¹⁴Royal Writ dated 29-6-923, Matilakam Records, No.21.

¹⁵Royal Writ dated 29-6-923, Matilakam Records, No.21.

¹⁶Nittu, dated 1-1-949 M.E., Palace Records, No.83.

¹⁷Ullor Parameswara Aiyer, S., 'Colonel Munro', (Kerala Society Paper Series, VII, p.47.)

¹⁸Royal Writ dated 29-6-923, Matilakam Records, No.21.

¹⁹Sadasivam, S., Ceranadum Centamilum (Tamil) Nagercoil, 1949, p.186.

²⁰*Ibid*, p.185.

²¹Document XI, Kerala Society Paper, Series VII, pp.31-32.