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SACRIFICES AND SUFFERINGS OF VELU NACHIYAR-FIRST WOMAN FREEDOM FIGHTER OF INDIA

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Abstract:

The heroine of the valiant history of the South India, Queen Velu Nachchiyar of Sivagangai is one who is imprisoned in the Womb of time capsule. This valiant woman had found a pride of place in the very first chapter of the history of the Freedom struggle of this country. She was in the forefront in many aspects of life. She is compared with the Queen Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi who fought against British in the Northern part of this country eighty five years later. The Tamil Queen fought and drove away the British and ruled over her state as an independent ruler for a period of ten years.

KEY WORDS:

Queen, Marava, Sethupathi, Palayam, Poligar, Kingdom.

INTRODUCTION

Queen Velu Nachiyar was the First Tamil Queen and freedom fighter¹, able general, great warrior, benevolent despot. She was the follower of Puli Tevar² by adopting secularism, equality, fraternity, democracy, Social justice and preserver of Culture in her administration. As the Tamil Queen played a vital role in the native resistance against the British in the last quarter of the Eighteenth Century, and fought with British Eighty Five years earlier than Jhansi Rani Lakshmi Bai in India. Hence she is the First Women Freedom Fighter in Indian History.

The Proclamation of Lord Edward Clive made on 6 July 1801 after the fall of Marudhu Brothers is a contemporary document of the period of Velu Nachchiyar. The following facts based on that proclamation which are available are stated below:

1. Sasivarna Thevar becoming the first king of Sivagangai because of his valour.
2. His son Muthuvaduganathar (mentioned as Ulaganathar in the proclamation) succeeding him as king of Sivagangai.
3. His death in the battle that took place in Kalaiyarkoil.
4. The escape of his widow with their only daughter.
5. The taking over of the governance of Sivagangai state by that widow.

Thus the proclamation of Edward Clive contain certain facts about the royal family of Eighteenth Century Sivagangai State. It also gives information about the history of the valiant woman, Queen Velu Nachchiyar.

Muthuvaduganatha Thevar was the son of Sasivarna Periya Udaya Thevar the first independent King of Sivagangai State. The newly created Sivagangai State had to meet a number of wars. Both the Maravar States in cooperation with each other met the challenges to them successfully. The effort of the forces of Marathas of Tanjore in the year 1732 to capture it and bring it under its control was defeated. When

Bangaru Tirumalai Nayak and his son Vijaya Kumara Nayak were driven out of their State Madurai in the year 1736 by Chandha Sahib, the two Marava States gave them asylum and provided them with all facilities to stay comfortably in Vellikkuruchi belonging to Sivagangai State in a manner fitting to their royal dignity. In the year 1745, the Marathas of Tanjore started giving trouble to the Marava States again. As these two states had to pay full attention to repulse the attacks of the Marathas they could not find any solution for the problem of Vijaya Kumara Nayak. At this time, the Sethupathi of Ramanathapuram State expired which added another difficult dimension to the problems. In the years 1747-1748, these two states had to face a severe famine. Muthuvaduganatha Thevar was not deterred by any of the incidents and adverse circumstances described above. He was in charge of the administration of Sivagangai State from the year 1730 to 1750, though his father Sasivarna Thevar was the King. History has bestowed on him the distinction of being the Ruler of Sivagangai state for the longest period from the year 1750 till he was killed in Kalaiyarkoil in the year 1772. His death in the battle with the forces of Col. Smith in the year 1772 was the most grief-stricken incident in history. In the slaughter in Kalaiyarkoil men, women and children were killed without any distinction. The wife of Muthuvaduganathar, Gowri Nachchiar was also not an exception to this inhuman tragedy. After the completion of this cruel slaughter, robbery and plunder started there. From that time the Englishmen got 50,000 pagodas. Only people who escaped from this inhuman slaughter were those who were away from that place. It was only an act of providence that minister Thandavaraya Pillai, Queen Velu Nachchiar and the most dependable and trustworthy Marudhu brothers escaped this slaughter.³

The death of her husband Muthuvaduganathar was informed to Queen Velu Nachchiar who was staying at that time in Kollangudi and she rushed to Kalaiyarkoil fort. The ghostly scene which she saw there shocked her mind and body together. She had not even heard of such a beastly, dastardly, inhuman and cruel act before she actually saw it and she had the misfortune to see it

Multi-Linguist Queen

Queen Velu Nachchiar was the daughter of king Sellamuthu Sethupathi of Ramanathapuram and Sakkandhi Muththaththal Nachchiar. Sakkandhi was one of the auxiliary Palayams of Sivagangai State adjoining Sivagangai. Queen Velu Nachchiar was very active and talented when she was young. She wanted to learn many languages and accordingly she learnt Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Urdu, English and French languages. The person who taught her the French language was a priest by name Jose-de-pray.

Literary Genius

She had studied the Sangam literary works, Silappadhikoram and Manimegalai and also epics like Ramayanam and Mahabharatha. It was customary that any boy or girl born in a Royal family should not only be well versed in these literary works and epics, but also be well versed in the art of warfare. This was the tradition followed by the family of Sethupathies, and accordingly Velu Nachchiar was well versed in all these aspects.

Family Tradition

Velu Nachchiar was married to Muthuvaduganathar and the couple was blessed with only one daughter. As Muthuvaduganathar who was to have brought up the girl Vellachchi according to the requirements and traditions of the royal family, was killed by the Englishmen in the most ghastly, inhuman and brutal manner and so the responsibility fell on Velu Nachchiar. Minister Thandavaraya Pillai consoled the grief stricken Queen placing her in the place of her father. Thandavaraya Pillai who served under Sasivarna Thevar and Muthuvaduganathar as minister was a person with a lot of experience in various aspects of life and in the art of governance of a State. Therefore when the king was killed in the battlefield, his mind made a very quick calculation and came to the conclusion that he should obtain the help of Hyder Ali of Mysore and bring back the shattered Sivagangai State to its normal eminent position.⁴

Two Options

There were only two options before Velu Nachchiar who was immersed in deep grief due to the demise of her husband. One option was self-immolation as per the customs and traditions. The other option was to wreak vengeance against the British and the Nawab for the unjustifiable killing of her husband and capturing Sivagangai State. The question before her was whether to emulate Kopperundevi, wife of Pandyan Nedunchezian king of Madurai, who died the moment her husband died when pointed out by

Kannagi and proved in his court that he ordered the killing of her husband Kovalan unjustifiably without thoroughly and properly enquiring into the case of the theft of the anklet of his queen and realizing what he did was wrong or to emulate Kannagi wife of Kovalan who was falsely accused of stealing the anklet of the Queen of the Pandya King of Madurai and ordered to be killed by him for which wrongful act Kannagi burnt the city of Madurai in a fit of rage as a revenge for the unjustifiable killing of her husband Kovalan. Velu Nachiyar opted to emulate Kannagi and Thandavaraya Pillai gave her proper advice.

Period of Transition

Sivagangai State came under the rule of the Nawab of Arcot with his flag fluttering over the palace of Sivagangai. His son Ameer- ul- Umara ruled the State for a period of eight years as the representative of the Nawab of Arcot. The name of Sivagangai was changed as 'Hussain Nagar.' The revolutionary forces of Sivagangai was observing all that was happening in Sivagangai staying in the border areas of Sivagangai. The leaders of these revolutionary forces who were giving a lot of troubles to the rule of the Nawab were the Marudhu Brothers who were instrumental to bring Sivagangai back to freedom in later days.

Cordial Relations with Hyder Ali

After completing the last rites of the king, further course of action was planned. Velu Nachchiyar along with some bodyguards went to Virupakshi Palayam and sought asylum with Gopal Nayak. At the proper time Velu Nachchiyar along with a group of youngsters of Sivagangai left the place and proceeded to meet Hyder Ali to seek his help in order to wreak vengeance on the enemies who had harmed them..

The meeting of Velu Nachchiyar with Hyder Ali took place in Dindugul. Hyder Ali was wonder struck and was highly impressed by the remarkable capacity of a woman. He was amazed when Velu Nachchiyar conversed with him in Urdu language and promised her that he would help her. The rule of Nawab of Arcot over Sivagangai which has already been weakened by the problems created by the revolutionary forces fumbled further on hearing about the assurance given by Hyder Ali to help Velu Nachchiyar. Though the Nawab tried to protect his interests with the help of the army of the East India Company all his efforts were defeated by the patriotic and loyal people of Sivagangai. After a period of eight years the flag of Nawab of Arcot was lowered from the flag post of Sivagangai palace and the Hanuman flag of Sivagangai was hoisted again under the reign of Velu Nachiyar.⁵

Three Decisions

After ascending the throne, Velu Nachchiyar made three important decisions. She appointed Chinna Marudhu who was trained by Thandavaraya Pillai as her advisor and Periya Marudu who was with her husband when they were young, accompanied him when he went for hunting and also to battle fields as his shadow and was well versed about the intricacies of the usage of weapons as Commander. Further, she adopted Padamathur Gowri Vallaba Thevar who came of the lineage of her husband and who enjoyed the love and affection of her husband, as her son.

Forerunner of Secularism

As Velu Nachiyar was a learned scholar, she was well versed in indigenous and foreign language.⁶ Without any language disparities she learnt many languages and when she took refuge in the court of Hyder Ali, he admired her courage and language efficiency and rendered help to restore Sivagangai.⁷ Moreover, Hyder Ali granted permission to stay at Virupakshi or Dindugal Fort where she was respected and treated as a Royal Queen, until she decided to leave and financially supported by granting 400 pound (gold) for her monthly expenses.⁸ In order to fulfill her desire, Hyder Ali ordered to build Rajarajeswari temple and install goddess Rajarajeshwari, an idol made up of gold, within the fort of Dindugal⁹ for her worship. It is clear that they followed religious toleration, respect the refugees without any discrimination and set an example for secularism in Indian History. After the restoration of Sivagangai, Velu Nachiyar also built a mosque and a Church at Sarugani.¹⁰ Moreover, she gave gift to the Muslim soldiers, who were helpful at the time of restoration. She had sent a golden tiger to Tipu Sultan as a gift¹¹ to show her gratitude and considered him as her brother. Still we can have as witness the golden tiger at Mysore palace. She showed her gratitude by giving gift to Gopala Nayak of Dindugal¹² who sent his forces at the time of war. In later days, when Marudhus acted against her will, she sought the help of Hyder Ali who warned the Marudhu Brothers.¹³ She had maintained cordial relations with Hyder Ali till her last days. He also considered her as his sister. Though both belonged to different religion, community, language, culture

they were bound by brotherhood and helped each other in times of need without any hesitation. In such a way she promoted Secularism, Brotherhood and Social Justice in Sivaganga Kingdom and set an example for others after her.

Organiser of Women Force

It was formed by Queen Velu Nachiyar with herself as a trainer for that force. When she and her daughter Vellachi Nachiyar accompanied by the loyal servants narrowly escaped near Kalayarkoil (at Ariyakkurichi Ayyanar Koil) which was known only to a herd girl Udaiyal. The royal family was chased by Benjour and an enquiry made Udaiyal. But she refused to answer to the cruel British force. Immediately, he ordered his soldiers to slaughter the Young Martyr Udaiyal in the same place. In order to honour her, Queen Velu Nachiyar named her force as Udaiyal Padai.¹⁴ Moreover, she erected Veera Kal (Hero Stone)¹⁵ where she sacrificed her life for the country and offered her Diamond Sacred Tie as first offering of the Vettudaiyal Kalamman temple at Ariyakkurichi and granted many villages ¹⁶ for performing daily pooja. Still people of that area worship her as Goddess Udaiyal (or) Vettudaiyal Kalamman. It shows Velu Nachiyar's gratitude, and practice of honorary the Martyr of Sivaganga kingdom.

Achievements of Udaiyal Padai

Captain Quili and Adappakari ¹⁷ Irrulayei, Kottai Priya Nangai Nachi were the important members of that force. They followed the method Guerrilla Warfare ¹⁸ to attack their enemies.

In 1780, (6th Iyppasi ,seventh Tamil month] on Friday, Udaiyal Padai started their attempt to restore Sivaganga.¹⁹ The previous day of Vijayadasamy, Velu Nachiar made a plot against the British. Because there was no restriction on the particular day, to worship Goddess Rajarajeshwari by the women, which is located inside the Sivaganga Palace. British on the other hand made a plot against the people. But fortunately, Captain Quili came to know the plot against them just few minutes earlier. Within the fraction of the moment, she decided to save the Queen and restore Sivaganga by sacrificing life. She burnt herself and acted as Human Bomb to destroy the arsenals kept inside the temple. It was unexpected by British force, which led them inactive on the moment. The British soldiers were ravaged by Udaiyal Padai, under Velu Nachiyar, who came out into the front and gallantly played the role of a defender to restore Sivaganga²⁰ with the help of Udaiyal Padai.

Greatness of Velu Nachiyar

In 1788, Queen Velu Nachiyar was relegated to the background by the Marudhu Brothers. She felt insulted and wanted to reassert herself and control the administration. In 1788, the rift widened and the Queen sought to curtail the authority of the Marudhu Brothers. The Nawab came forward to assist the Queen Velu Nachiyar in her conflict with the Marudhu Brothers and promised assistance.²¹ This precipitated a clash between the supporters of the Queen Velu Nachiyar and the Marudhus, in consequence of which the Queen was forced to seek shelter in the fort of Sivaganga.²² Ultimately Mohammed Ali with the help of the British force defeated Marudhu Brothers. It shows that the people who were against the sovereign were suppressed by the Royal Order.

A few references say that the Sivaganga ruling house was gradually slipping from the Maravas to the Agamudaiars.²³ When Velu Nachiyar became old, she proclaimed her daughter Vellachi Nachiyar as legal heir for Sivaganga Samasthanam in 1790.²⁴ As Vellachi Nachiyar was inefficient and inexperienced in administration of Sivaganga, Marudhu Brothers were appointed as Chief Ministers of Sivaganga by Queen Velu Nachiyar. When they implemented the royal orders, they were familiar and famous among the people of Sivaganga. Thus, Sivaganga had come completely under the control of the two Agamudaiars, after the reign of Queen Velu Nachiyar. At this juncture, Marudhu Brothers acted as defacto rulers of Sivaganga.²⁵ It is clear that, efficient persons can rule the country without any royal background. Thus, she paved the way for the formation of democracy in India.

Thus Velu Nachiyar was the only royal woman, who restored her Kingdom from the British by open war and ruled for a decade. She was known for the policies of secularism, equality, fraternity, recognition for social acceptance and democracy during her reign in Sivaganga. She was one of the forerunners of a women Force even before Neataji Subash Chandra Force organizes women Force under Laxmi Shegal in the name of Jhansi Women Force. She followed the policy of Secular State, Equal Status to all efficient persons without any discrimination, to develop brotherly relationship with (Hyder Ali and Gopala Naik) neighbouring countries and promote brotherhood, to install Veera kal and build a temple to the young Martyr, Udaiyal and honour the patriot, to build Mosque, Church, and Temple in order to promote

communal harmony. She gave respect to royal tradition, culture and convention. She never remarried. She was very careful that no legal problem should not arise at the time of successor.

Marriage Option of Vellachi Nachiyar

Velu Nachchiyar who tried to bring peace and begin rule of the State by such of her decisions as these, could not enjoy a peaceful life at home. She had problems as to whom she should entrust her daughter who had attained maturity and also to whom she should entrust the rulership of the State after her. Regarding the marriage of her daughter two persons were proposed, One was king Muthuramalinga Sethupathy of Ramanathapuram and the other was a relative in the lineage of her mother Sanganthi Vengan Periya Udaya Thevar. Velu Nachchiyar preferred the latter and her daughter was married to Periya Udaya Thevar. The interest of her State was foremost in her mind while taking such a decision.

Succession Option for Throne

Serious problem arose on the matter of succession to the throne of Sivagangai State. Whether her successor should be her adopted son Gowri Vallaba Thevar or her son-in-law Vengan Periya Udaya Thevar was the problem. She had to take a decision on this sensitive and important matter. Vengan Periya Udaya Thevar had the support of the Marudhu Brothers. However, Velu Nachchiyar had affection for Gowri Vallaba Udayana Thevar. This competition for the Rulership of Sivagangai created a lot of problems in the political scenario of Sivagangai State. Velu Nachchiyar had to undergo tremendous mental agony. To strengthen his claim to the throne, Vengan Periya Udaya Thevar married the daughter of Periya Marudhu as his second wife which intensified the already complicated problem. This situation attracted the attention of the enemies of Sivagangai who were all out to exploit the situation to the best of their advantage. The British started enacting a drama with a dual role as though they were on the side of Velu Nachchiyar for some time and on the other side for some time. As a result of that, Vengan Periya Udaya Thevar became King of Sivagangai as per the compromise formula suggested by the British. The adopted son of Velu Nachiyar Padamathur Gowri Vallaba Thevar escaped to Arantangi to protect his life.

Medical Treatment in France

In the year 1790, Vellachchi Nachiyar, the daughter of Velu Nachiyar was married to Vengan Periya Udaya Thevar and the latter became the king of Sivagangai State due to the compromise formula of the British died under mysterious circumstances. Velu Nachiyar became broken-hearted because of this and she became physically weak and sick because of the tremendous mental stress and strain to which she was subjected to for quite some time. A bishop by name Jose-de-pray arranged for the treatment of her heart ailment in France. It is presumed, but not confirmed that she would have gone to Paris in the year 1791. After a gap of three years Velu Nachiyar appeared again in Sivagangai. When Velu Nachiyar came to Sivagangai, her only daughter Vellachchi Nachiyar expired earlier.²⁶

Final Days

As the situation was not continuously conducive for her in Sivagangai, Velu Nachiyar went to Virupakshi Palayam and stayed there. She died there on 25th December 1796. Her mortal remains was sent to Sivagangai with all the honour and respect to a Queen. Her son-in-law Vengan Periya Udaya Thevar performed her last rites.

End of Patriots

The British who noticed certain changes in the behaviour of Vengan Periya Udaya Thevar and the Marudhu Brothers after the expiry of Velu Nachchiyar convened a meeting in Sivagangai. In this meeting it was decided to make Padamathur Gowri Vallabha Thevar as King of Sivagangai State. As a result of this the Marudhu Brothers were hanged to death and Vengan Periya Udaya Thevar was banished from Sivagangai State.²⁷

To conclude, French Father Chechool-De- Breys' Dairy says that Velu Nachiaar suffered from Heart problem in her last days. She took treatment at France for more than a month where she attended many official functions and taught Vallari (Native Warfare) to the daughter of French Ruler. It may be true that in her last days, she was unhappy due to the death of her daughter and grand daughter.

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