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GROWING INFLUENCE OF PULI TEVAR IN TIRUNELVELI PROVINCE

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Abstract:-The independent nature and rebellious tendency of Puli Tevar and his allies and his role in uniting the discontented elements against the Nawab, posed a great challenge to the latter. Puli Tevar was not ready to accept the suzerainty of the Nawab of Arcot nor the British. His active co-operation to the central power had disappeared with the end of Pandya's rule. On the other hand, the Nawab wanted to establish his central authority over the Tirunelveli region where the British also wanted to expand their influence. Unable to control the Western Poligars under Puli Tevar, the Nawab sought the help of the British. The British, who were in financial stringency thanks to the costly European wars, agreed to the Nawab's plea. They decided to collect *peshkush* from Poligars and adjust it in favour of the Nawab's debt, popularly called 'Arcot Debts'.

Keywords:poligars, peshkush,circar, amuldars,carnatic, Nawab, British,

INTRODUCTION-

British Attention over Tirunelveli Province

Among the Western Poligars of Tirunelveli, Puli Tevar gained a special status thanks to his leadership among Poligars. He strongly believed that he could not accept the overlordship of either the Nawab of Carnatic or his representatives, the amuldars. He nurtured such an independent spirit not only in himself but also among the Western Poligars. The Nawab felt that Puli Tevar was a source of trouble to him in collecting the *circar* revenue and *peshkush*. The leadership provided by Puli Tevar enabled his fellow Poligars to defy the Nawab's authority. The occurrence of the Carnatic Wars and subsequent defeat of the French provided an opportunity to the British to involve themselves in the Carnatic affairs. The British realized that the Southern Carnatic region, especially the Tirunelveli region was a fertile region to yield good revenue. Realising the designs of the Nawab and the British, Puli Tevar was determined to provide a formidable resistance. Unable to control the predatory activities of Western Poligars, the Nawab left the collection of revenue of Tirunelveli to the British authorities. The British began to send military generals to suppress Puli Tevar and his allies. It was very evident that the Tirunelveli Poligars were out of the control of the Nawab. Therefore the Nawab offered the Tirunelveli region to the British and, the Nawab, in turn, expected the British to help him to quell the Poligars.

The British, on getting the right over the Poligar region, felt that fight with the native military chieftains was unavoidable. The tussle between the Western Poligars and the British began in 1751 and it became very severe only from 1755. Puli Tevar, the Poligar of Nercattanseval, resisted the expansion of the British Power as well as the authority of the Nawab.¹

Campaign of Colonel Heron

The British Government at Madras organized the first military attempt in the Poligar region under the leadership of Captain Cope in 1751. The combined forces of the British and Nawab Mohammed Ali could not suppress the Poligars.² As the first attempt ended in failure, George Pigot, the Governor of Madras, sent a powerful detachment to the far south, under Col. Alexander Heron. He attacked the chieftains of Manaparai. Then the victorious forces moved to Nattam and stormed the fort of Kovilkudi and massacred the ferocious Kallars. The indiscriminate killing of the inhabitants turned the Kallars against the

British. They retaliated and the British suffered considerable loss. Hence the British contingent moved to Tirunelveli.³

Before leaving for Tirunelveli, Heron ordered that the Tirunelveli Poligars should forthwith pay all arrears to the Nawab and accept his overlordship.⁴ On March 25, 1755, Col. Heron with his army and that of Maphuz Khan, the elder brother of Mohammed Ali, the Nawab of Arcot, arrived in Tirunelveli and threatened the Poligars who did not respond to his first call.⁵ The Poligar of Sivagiri remained loyal to the Nawab. However, Puli Tevar, the Poligar of Nercattanseval, raised the banner of revolt and refused to acknowledge the overlordship of Nawab nor Col. Heron's mission.⁶ Maphuz Khan was ordered to suppress the rebel chief of Nercattanseval.⁷ Col. Heron supported the cause of Maphuz Khan against the Poligars and appointed the latter to be the representative of the Nawab in Tirunelveli.⁸ In the meantime, Madras Council recalled Col. Heron in accordance with the treaty concluded with the French in 1755, according to which non-interference in Indian politics was imposed on the British.⁹ On May 2, 1755, Col. Heron left Tirunelveli in response to the orders of the Madras Government but instead of proceeding directly to Tiruchirappalli, he went to Nercattanseval. Maphuz Khan convinced Col. Heron that the fort of Puli Tevar was made of mud and very vulnerable. Moreover, Puli Tevar had given asylum to Moodemiah and Nabi Khan Kattack, the Pathan chiefs of Madurai who never accepted the Nawab's supremacy.¹⁰ When the British forces arrived, Puli Tevar decided to resist it. It was the misfortune of Col. Heron that he was betrayed by his interpreter. Puli Tevar had earlier received secret information that the British had no battering cannons and that they would not remain long in a state of siege.¹¹

Heron in Nercattanseval

The fort of Nercattanseval was well built by stone and clay and it stood on a plain. It had no cover near it except a hill. The British troops under Col. Heron encamped near it to batter the fort.¹² Heron sent his vakeel to the place of Puli Tevar to demand the arrears. When Puli Tevar did not accept the demands, Heron threatened to batter the fort into pieces. Finally, Col. Heron demanded 20,000 rupees on the spot as a tribute. Puli Tevar replied to the Colonel that he might do as he pleased and that such a huge sum could not be raised and he was determined not to pay even a single rupee.¹³ Due to lack of cannons, Col. Heron's attempt to batter the fort failed. Col. Heron's report on this engagement provided the correct picture of the situation. He wrote, "My information in regard to the strength of the place and force of this Poligar was intolerably bad. Instead of a mud fort and few colleries as I was told, we found a very strong fortification. The fort was defended by about 4,000 men and eleven pieces of cannons served by the Dutch. I tried to batter their walls with six pounder but found that they had no effect.¹⁴ Therefore it seemed it was not an easy task to suppress Puli Tevar who was ready to meet any situation of grave danger."

Robert Orme, who narrates the achievements of Puli Tevar, does not mention the resistance of Puli Tevar and reasons for his success.¹⁵ The success behind Puli Tevar was due to good command and the support of all the Western Poligars and a disciplined band of dedicated soldiers. They were fired by the spirit of challenge and they were ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of defending their fort.¹⁶

In the course of military expedition, Col. Heron committed another mistake. Induced by handsome presents, he appointed Maphuz Khan as ruler of Tirunelveli without the knowledge of the Madras Government and the Nawab. This was a violation of trust placed on Col. Heron by the British authority. It was disliked by both the British and the Nawab.¹⁷ Later Col. Heron was tried by the court martial on charges of bribery and dismissed from service.¹⁸

This information prompted Puli Tevar to continue to be rebellious against the Nawab and the British. He was assisted by the Pathan chiefs who had been the representatives of Chanda Sahib at Madurai. During the expedition of Col. Heron, these Pathan chiefs abandoned their rule and took refuge with Puli Tevar.¹⁹ After the departure of Col. Heron, once again these Pathan chiefs commenced their struggle over the regions of Madurai and Tirunelveli which were then held by Maphuz Khan.

The Pollam of Puli Tevar and his fort gave him a good citadel of resistance. Among the Poligars, Puli Tevar was known for his heroic activities in the battlefields. He was determined that at any cost it was his duty to replace the Nawab's supremacy. He aspired for the rule of either the Pandyas or the Nayaks whom he called Patron Saints of the Poligars. He was well backed by his able generals. His soldiers were well trained in native guerilla warfare methods. As the British troops were not acquainted with this region, their forces faced untold miseries. Hence all the early British military expeditions against Puli Tevar could not succeed. Convinced of the leadership of Puli Tevar, the contenders for the governorship of Madurai and Tirunelveli provinces sought the help of Puli Tevar and accepted his overlordship.

Even Col. Heron was astonished by the activities of Puli Tevar. The imperial forces under Col. Heron could not face the military prowess of Puli Tevar and his forces. With the help of mere native soldiers, Puli Tevar met the mighty British General and resisted the British administrators. The victory of Puli Tevar and defeat of the British were events of significance in the annals of the rise of Tirunelveli Poligars.

After the victory of Puli Tevar over Col. Heron, the independent activities of the Poligars increased in Tirunelveli. The growing power of Puli Tevar increased the threat to the Nawab and the British. The Nawab urged the British to suppress the power of Puli Tevar. Hence the British adopted the strategy of divide and rule. They realised the strength of Puli Tevar and decided to wean the Eastern Naick Poligars away from the Western Marava Poligars. Puli Tevar responded by taking steps to strengthen his position by organizing the Marava Confederacy. All the local chieftains and Western Poligars whole-heartedly combined and extended their support to Puli Tevar. Thus Puli Tevar was acknowledged as a leader and the responsibilities to protect the interests of the Poligars devolved on him.

Puli Tevar's League

To meet the imminent danger of the British at any time, Puli Tevar, Nabi Khan Kattack and Moodemiah formed an alliance to terminate the Nawab's rule over Carnatic. Marthanda Varma, the King of Travancore, also joined the alliance, resenting the annexation of Kalakkad by the Nawab.²⁰ The King of Travancore had already acquired Kalakkad and a range of areas extending thirty miles from Kalakkad to Cape Comerin which separated Travancore from Tirunelveli. Heron's expedition, on behalf of the Nawab challenged the King's right over Kalakkad. Moodemiah went to Travancore to persuade the King Marthanda Varma to hold on to the Kalakkad area. When Maphuz Khan came to know about these schemes and preparations, he immediately rushed to Tirunelveli with the British sepoy.²¹ Before his arrival, Moodemiah reached Tirunelveli with 2000 Nairs and a number of sepoy. Their forces also joined Puli Tevar near Kalakkad.²² In the subsequent fierce battle, Maphuz Khan was defeated and 300 of his sepoy were driven away. Their muskets were collected by Puli Tevar's soldiers and it was regarded as a very valuable trophy.²³ Maphuz Khan continued the attack without any success. After the failure, Maphuz Khan returned to Tirunelveli in order to collect new forces and materials.

At the same time, Puli Tevar, Moodemiah and Nabi Khan Kattack continued their rebel activities. All the Marava Poligars of the west, namely, the Poligars of Uttumalai, Surandai, Talaivankottai, Naduvakurichi, Singampatti, Urkad, Seithur, Kollankondan and Wadagarai, except the Vannia Marava Poligar of Sivagiri, were with Puli Tevar. Among the Pollams, Wadagarai Pollam was notable for its strategic position.²⁴ It could offer the facility to communicate directly with Travancore, if the latter turned hostile. The eastern side of the Tirunelveli province was dominated by Kattabomman.²⁵ Puli Tevar proposed a union between the two groups. But Kattabomman and his dependent, Ettaiyapuram Poligar, refused to accept the offer in order to safeguard their hostages who were in prison at Tiruchirappalli. Both the Poligars of Madurai and the Poligar of Nattam agreed to join the confederacy. Such an extensive confederacy gave new strength to Puli Tevar to pursue his relentless struggle. As Maphuz Khan faced a lot of difficulties in reorganizing his forces, he could not put down the unrest of the Poligars in general and rebel activities of Puli Tevar in particular.²⁶

The disunity between the two groups of Poligars helped the central rulers, to some extent, to assert their authority. The Poligars, both Maravas and Naicks, were on opposite camps. Tamil-speaking Maravas and Telugu-speaking Naicks were locked up in rivalry.²⁷ Kattabomman realized that if he joined the confederacy, his status would be lowered to the level of an ordinary chief. Therefore, Kattabomman did not join the League. However, the unity of strength among the Western Poligars of Tirunelveli province enabled the confederates to commence their activities of plunder and raid in sircar territory in Tirunelveli Province. They even threatened the existence of Maphuz Khan.²⁸

The Madras Government received the news about the rising power of Puli Tevar. Captain Caillaud of Tiruchirappalli, the Nawab of Arcot and the Governor of Madurai were apprised of the movements of Puli Tevar. The Government of Madras was greatly alarmed at the growing influence of Puli Tevar and decided to send a strong force under the leadership of Khan Sahib.

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