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## **EARLY KAVAL (POLICE) SYSTEM IN TINNEVELLY**

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### **Abstract:-District at a Glance**

The district is located in the southern part of Tamil Nadu and surrounded by Virudhunagar District on the north, Western Ghats on the West, Kanniyakumari District on the south, Tuticorin District on the East. The lifeline of the district river Tamiraparani feeds the district and quenches the thirst of residents of Tuticorin district too.

**Keywords:** Early Kaval (Police), Tinnevelly Country, ancient and hereditary one.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Kaval System prevailed in the Tinnevelly Country on the eve of the British rule. This system prevailed throughout Tinnevelly Country as an ancient and hereditary one. Under this system, Watch and Ward functions were discharged by the village Kavalkars who were drawn mostly from predatory tribes. The Kavalkars provided protection to the residents, their life and property and cattle and safeguarded the fields surrounding the village, especially in the cultivation season, besides, the temple premises and its possessions. On the other hand, the Kavalars levied taxes on all property to which this system was applied. The existence of the system was a matter very much concerned with geographical accident and mutual compromise.

### **MEANING OF KAVAL**

The word 'Kaval' means 'watch' and the person who looked after something was a Kavalkar. The Kaval System was in substance based upon the common sense principle, 'set a thief to catch a thief'. Accordingly, the responsibility of apprehending a thief was entrusted to groups of inhabitants like Kallars and Maravars who, during this period, considered robbery as their profession. Thus it sought to rectify a social evil by the application of a self corrective remedy. Originally the system was an arrangement adopted for policing the villages built within the forest clearings.

The communities, who assumed the status of Kshatriyas during the medieval period, were mostly associated with the Kaval System. The establishment of the British hegemony, coupled with their superior arms and ammunitions, threatened the very existence of the Kaval System. The Madras Government adopted strict measures to relieve the Kavalkars from their military duties due to the latter's involvement in the Poligar rebellions.

### **KAVAL SYSTEM IN TINNEVELLY**

The Kaval duties were shared by Poligars and Kavalkars. The Poligars provided regional security while the villages were given protection by the Kavalkars. The Poligars independently collected the taxes for their protection duties. On the other hand, the Kavalkars were responsible either to the sircar governors or to the Poligars, by whom they were appointed to Kaval and collection duties. During the days of the Nayaks and the Nawabs, due importance was given to the Kaval duties. The Kavalkars enjoyed special status in the sircar territory or revenue units like Tinnevelly. In Tinnevelly, the Maravas were a source of native resistance to the sircar authority. To prevent any illegal activities following the predatory nature of the Maravars, the sircar agents like Amuldar and Amils replaced the

Maravars themselves as Kavalkars.

### **KINDS OF KAVAL**

Tinnevely was one among the twelve revenue units of Tinnevely region. For the protection of a sircar territory like Tinnevely, the Nayaks and the Nawabs favoured the Kavalkars. The Amil of Tinnevely maintained Kavalkars to safeguard the people and to keep the revenue collection intact. Kaval was not considered the basic duty of Poligars in the Poligar regions. However, they assumed this responsibility as the law and order deteriorated.

The rulers and village communities failed in their duty because of internal commotions or external disorders. The Poligar received the assistance of Kavalkars who were the traditional guardians of law and order in the sircar village. Protection to life and property was their watch word. They were classified under four heads, namely, Arasu Kavalkars, Nadu Kavalkars, Desa Kavalkars and Sthala Kavalkars which literally meant, government watch and ward, district watch and ward, region watch and ward, the village watch and ward respectively.

### **FUNCTIONS**

The important functions of Kavalkars were to watch and protect the houses in a village at night, to protect the travelers and merchants, to obtain information of suspicious characters and to send reports to the authorities. However, in the Fifth Report of the English East India Company Affairs, it is noted that where the influence of the Poligars predominated, the most skillful and experienced offenders were turned into Kavalkars. The services of the Kavalkars were rewarded by a fee called Sthala Kaval which consisted of a portion of the crops which they protected, or a monetary payment proportionate.

It is recorded that certain tribes followed the profession of robbery from generation to generation. Therefore, the members of these tribes were preferred for appointment as Kavalkars. If a theft occurred in a locality, Kavalkars had to trace the foot prints to apprehend the culprits. It was established that if the thief went out of the limits of the village, then it was the duty of the Kavalkars of the next village to follow it up. The last village, to which the thief was clearly traced, was made answerable for the stolen property. The Kavalkars were required to restore the stolen property to the owner. If they failed to do it, the Poligar forced them to make good for the loss to the extent of his means and levied the remainder upon the entire village. It is obvious that the protection of property and life was the individual responsibility of Kavalkars and the collective responsibility of the village community.

In a certain village, the Kaval was divided into 'munni' and 'nyal'. The munni Kaval was a certain allowance given from the sircar revenue both from land and customs, not less than five percent and not more than ten percent of the produce and it was enjoyed by the greater Poligars. The proportion, which fell on the lands, was collected in one kist at the harvest season. The Poligar sent his peons to every village with an order to the Patel and Karnam to pay the amount due to the chief. If they endeavoured to gain time by excuses, the Poligar sent some of his followers to commit thefts in the village and if that did not have the desired effect, he frequently carried off the Patel and Karnam, punished them and kept them in confinement, till they paid up what was due and also fines as he chose to impose. The nyal Kaval was held only by the inferior Poligars. It was an allowance in grain which was collected in November and December when it was reaped. In fact, The Kaval duties of the Kavalkars maintained by the Poligars, increased the tax burden on the inhabitants of the village around Tinnevely.

The services of Kavalkars in Tinnevely was noteworthy. Lord Satiya Nelliappar temple of Tinnevely was adored and venerated by believers and worshippers throughout the length and breadth of the Tinnevely region. In the course of their most hazardous and arduous journey, they were exposed to the threats of bandits. The political vicissitudes under the Vijayanagar rulers, the Nayaks, the Mughals, the Marathas and the Nawab of Carnatic further aggravated the conditions. During those troubled times, the Kavalkars rendered yeomen service especially in the protest of sacred places. With a spirit of dedication the Kavalkars of Tinnevely directly looked after the safety and comforts of the pilgrims. The Kavalkars retained control of the precincts of the temple as well as the hills.

In the Tinnevely region, the Kaval system was a predominant defensive organisation. The rulers sought the Poligars to look after the law and order situation in their respective villages. The Poligars, in turn, depended upon the Kavalkars. The political turmoil in the Carnatic region provided additional impetus to the Kaval System. The gradual decline of the authority of the Nawab rendered the Kaval System very strong. The Kaval System is regarded as the South Indian counterpart of the "hue and cry" in the Anglo Saxon England.

The growing power of the British, with their superior arms and ammunitions, affected the prospects of the Kaval system with passage of time. The dual administration of the British and the Nawab eroded the Kaval system in the Southern Poligars and sircar regions in Tinnevely. The Poligars of the southern region lost their right over tax collection because of the gradual ascendancy of the British. The British felt that intimidation was resorted to by the Poligars over the collection of Kaval duties. The British were determined to take drastic measures against the Kaval System. The British felt that Kaval duties were a kind of obnoxious taxes collected by the Poligars with the help of Kavalkars.

### **STHALAKAVAL**

Two kinds of Kaval fees were collected in the Tinnevely region viz., Sthala Kaval or Village Kaval and Desha Kaval or District Kaval. Sthala Kaval was a village police system. It was widely prevalent in the Tinnevely region. This was co-eval with the establishment of villages themselves. In every village, the Kavalkars maintained peace and order in the Villages under their control. Most of these Kavalkars belonged to the Marava community. The post of Kavalkar was hereditary. But the areas of Kavalkars were changed according to the whims and fancies of their masters. If the village had any temple that was under the direct Kaval of the chiefs, their primary function was to protect the grains, cattle and other domestic places like roads and markets. The Kavalkars were responsible if any robbery occurred in his area of operation. They were also held responsible for the recovery of the stolen property. If they did not find out the theft, the Kavalkars had to pay the damage amount. Kavalkars received a fee called 'Sathala Kaval.' Kavalkars were vested with judicial powers also. The petty disputes that took place in his region were settled by the Kavalkar.

### **DESHA KAVAKAL**

Desha Kaval was popularly called District Kaval. It was popular from 1720 A.D. The Poligars, with the assistance of the Kavalkars, were involved in the collection of Desha Kaval. The Desha Kaval was a later development but it yielded great profit to the protectors of the people. It exceeded the peshkush paid by the native military chieftains to the government. In the name of protection, Kavalkars collected Kaval fees. Due to fear of the military chieftains, the villagers yielded to all their demands. The chieftains received contributions like money, grain, ploughs, cattle etc. The villagers were put in confinement, if they failed to make timely payment of Kaval fee. The sircar regions were sometimes plundered by the Poligars. The Kavalkars permitted this plunder due to their link with the Poligars. Hence the British suspected the Kavalkars. The Poligars kept in am lands without paying any duty. Day by day their atrocities increased because of the intermixture of sircar lands under their respective Pollams.

In 1799, there were 2000 villages in the Tinnevely and Tinnevely regions. Among them, 477 villages were under independent Kavalkars. The rest came under the control of the Poligars. The Kavalkars had the right to collect the Sthalak Kaval and considerable amount was thus collected. The Poligars, interfering in the sircar villages, received a lot of profit from the Desha Kaval. Thus Poligars led a luxurious life. The Poligars received the fees through the Kavalkars. If they delayed payment, they will be punished severely. The Poligars sometimes plundered sircar territories. The Poligars kept close relations with Kavalkars, which affected the sircar revenue.

### **KAVALKARS**

In the past, the Kavalkars had come nearer to appropriate this role. Unlike the Taliari the Kavalkar was originally a state appointee. He was responsible not for a single village, but for several, and for the roads, wastelands and markets connected with them. But British attitudes to the Kavalkars were coloured by a conviction that they had become a corrupt and predatory 'robber police' and that they constituted a rival system inimical to the British control. During the warfare and political instability of Tamil Nadu in the eighteenth century, the right to collect Kaval (protection) fees was one of the means used by Poligars to gain control over the villages. J. H. Nelson, writing in the 1860s, described the Kaval as one of the Poligars' 'most highly cherished privileges', a means through which they 'gained an influence and authority over the ryots which were highly undesirable and indeed productive of the worst consequences'. Bishop Robert Caldwell, the author of the History of Tinnevely, wrote that in Tinnevely the Kaval fees were 'levied by the Poligars from the defenseless villagers as the price of their forbearing to plunder them'. The rapacious appropriation was continued due to the strength of the Poligars and the inability of the Nawab's government to enforce due authority over them'. Munro in his 1806 report on the police of the Ceded Districts expressed great sympathy and appreciation for the Taliaris, who discharged the 'real duty of the police', but he condemned the Kavalkars as performing 'no useful service', being 'too little accustomed to subordination' and constituting the 'remains of a race of men who have always been dangerous to the tranquility of the country'. Even Munro's affection for the institutions of the past had its selectivity.

### **SUBORDINATION OF KAVALKARS**

Encountering the Kaval system as a bastion of poligar power and absolutely a threat to their own supremacy and effective control, the British officials of the East India Company set out either to suppress the Kavalkars or to co-opt and subordinate them. In the early Nineteenth-Century land settlements Kavalkars were offered lands and pensions in exchange for the surrender of their Kaval claims. Some powerful Kavalkars were thereby transformed into Zamindars and other titular landholders, and the old form disappeared from most districts between 1800 and 1820. 'Little Kavalkars' were invited to take employment under the Company as its own police. However, these ploys were not entirely successful in eradicating Kaval system and in some districts it remained a rival system of

rural control well into the Twentieth Century.

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