

**ISSN: 2231-5063****IMPACT FACTOR : 4.6052 (UIF)****VOLUME - 6 | ISSUE - 7 | JANUARY - 2017****RAMANATHAPURAM : PAST AND PRESENT- A BIRD'S EYE VIEW****Dr. A. Vadivel****Department of History , Presidency College , Chennai , Tamil Nadu.****ABSTRACT**

*The present paper is an attempt to focus the physical features, present position and past history of the Ramnad District which was formed in the tail end of the Eighteenth Century. No doubt, the Ramnad District is the oldest district among the districts of the erstwhile Madras Presidency and the present Tamil Nadu. The District was formed by the British with the aim to suppress the southern poligars of the Tamil Country. For a while the southern poligars were rebellious against the expansion of the British hegemony in the south Tamil Country. After the formation of the Madras Presidency, this district became one of its districts. For sometimes it was merged with Madurai District and again its collectorate was formed in 1910. In the independent Tamil Nadu, it was trifurcated into Ramnad, Sivagangai and Virudhunagar districts. The district is, historically, a unique in many ways in the past and present. It was a war-torn region in the Eighteenth Century and famine affected region in the Nineteenth Century, and a region known for the rule of Setupathis. Many freedom fighters emerged in this district and contributed much for the growth of the spirit of nationalism.*



**KEY WORDS :** Ramanathapuram, Ramnad, District, Maravas, Setupathi, British Subsidiary System, Doctrine of Lapse, Dalhousie, Poligars.

**INTRODUCTION :i**

Situated in the south east corner of Tamil Nadu State, Ramanathapuram District is highly drought prone and most backward in development. It is surrounded by Pudukkottai District on the North, Sivagangai on northwest, Virudhunagar District on the west, Tuticorin District and Gulf of Mannar on the south and the Palk Strait on the East. This District in the present form came into existence from 15<sup>th</sup> March 1985 by trifurcating of the composite Ramanathapuram District. The district has an area of 4233.44 sq. km. and lying between the North latitudes of 09.56<sup>o</sup> and east longitudes of 78.13<sup>o</sup> and 79.26<sup>o</sup>. The unique feature of the District is its longest coastal line measuring about 265 kms accounting for nearly 1/4th of the total length of the coastal line of the State.<sup>1</sup>

Lord Ramanathaswamy of Ramanathapuram who has His temple at Rameswaram. According to popular legend, it had directed his faithful servant, Guha to build a town near the Sethu (Adam's Bridge). The town was called Mugavainagaram. Then the town appeared to have been very near the sea and even now it is occasionally

referred to as Mugavai. This town was later known as Ramanathapuram in association with the name of Rama and its proximity to the Sethu would justify the town being considered a very ancient one.<sup>2</sup>

In the early days of the imperialistic policy of British, this region was called by them as Ramnad, and this name is continued till the dawn of independence. This anglicised name, Ramnad, was however, later changed into Ramanathapuram to be more in conformity with the Tamil name for the region.<sup>3</sup>

When the British East India Company assumed control over Tirunelveli, it had included the major portion of the present district of Ramanathapuram (or Ramnad) and parts of Madurai. When the first Collector took charge in 1801, he had jurisdiction over the Palayams (later the Zamindaris) of Sivaganga and Ramnad.<sup>4</sup> But in 1803, these were combined in a separate district of Ramnad.

The present district of Ramnad was formed only in 1910, placing the seven taluks of the two Zamindari tracts with the taluks of Sriviliputtur and Sattur which had formed part of Tirunelveli district. Tirunelveli itself was reorganized several times and with the creation of Ramnad, it was divided into eight taluks. With its headquarters located at Ramanathapuram, the District has been divided into seven taluks, and eleven community development blocks for the purposes of revenue and development administration. There are 424 Revenue Villages and eight Towns including two Municipal Towns.

According to 2001 Census Report, the District has a total population of 11,44,040 representing 2.4% of the State population. This District has low population density of 268 persons per square kilo metre. The rural population constitutes 78% of the total opulation.<sup>5</sup>

This District has a hot tropical climate temperature from 22.3° C(min) to 37.8° C (Max) and the relative humidity is high at 79% on an average and it ranges between 80% to 90% in coastal areas.<sup>6</sup> This District receives rainfall both during the South West and North East monsoons. Annual average rainfall is 819 mm. Major part of rainfall is from North East monsoon - 65% of the annual rainfall. This district faces frequent of monsoon.<sup>7</sup>

There are no perennial rivers in the District. This District is essentially drained by two rivers viz. Vaigai and Gundar. There are about 1840 tanks in this District with an irrigation potential of around 60,000 hectares .The tanks normally would not attain full capacity, due to inadequate rainfall.<sup>8</sup>

The soil types in the district can be classified with: (a). Rack clay soils distributed through the district. (b).Sandy soil mainly found in Rameswaram Island. (c).Sandy loamy soil - in Kamudhi, Mudukulathur, Paramakudi and Ramanathapuram taluks and (d). Alluvial soil - a small proportion is found in Kamudhi, Mudukulathur, Paramakudi and Thiruvadana Blocks.<sup>9</sup>

The Economy of the district is predominantly depends upon agriculture. Paddy is the most stable crop cultivated in this District. Cambu, Cholan, Varagu, Kuthiravalli are the important millets grown in the District. Commercial crops like, Chillies and Cotton are cultivated under indefinite condition. Cotton and Chilies are the most important commercial crops grown in this tract under semi dry cultivation. In coastal areas like Tiruppulani and Mandapam, coconut is the most important plantation. The entire District economy depends on agriculture and fishing.<sup>10</sup>

Ramanathapuram district has the longest coastal line. So the fishermen of this district enjoys an unique advantage that they can fish practically for all the 365 days in a year because of the geographical location of fishing grounds. Rameswaram, Mandapam, Killakarai, Athankarai, Mookaiyur, Devipattinam, Pamban, Thondi, Erwadi, Uchipuli, Pasipattinam, Periapattinam, Sayalkudi, Thangachimadam, Valinokkam, Vedalai, Mariyur are some of the important fishing centres in this District.<sup>11</sup>

Ramanathapuram District has remained industrially most backward due to lack of adequate of good quality water supply, frequent power failures, inadequate availability of raw materials, poor transport net work. However, there are four spinning mills and two units for production rexine. There are many SSI units at Paramakudi, engaged in production of materials required by the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board. Handloom weavers are found in and around Emaneswararam and Paramakudi. This District offers less scope for employment potentials and opportunities in the tiny and cottage industrial sector.<sup>12</sup>

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The District has a total length of 1988 km of metalled and unsurfaced roads (1063.3). The District headquarters is well connected by rail and road. Even though the District headquarters is well connected with Madurai and other places, the transport network within the district still remains poor and developed.<sup>13</sup>

## RISE OF THE BRITISH

The British came to India to trade. They had to compete with other Europeans like the Dutch, the Portuguese, and the French. The Company which came here on commercial endeavour found the political condition in India conducive for colonial enterprise too. The Eighteenth Century India was politically fragmented, religiously segmented and socially stagnated. These conditions enabled the British to establish their political power over Indians without much difficulty. In the process of establishing political hegemony they had to deal with the petty native rulers and the European powers.

The relationship of the British with the Sethupathis of Ramnad was an interesting one. They had friendly relations and hostility. As in the case of other small Indian States, Ramnad also had to face oppression at the hands of alien administration. They awoke, arose, and succumbed. The history of the native resistance of Ramnad as the headquarters of the Southern Poligars, its relationship with the British, its stern opposition to the British constitute an interesting field of study in the history of Freedom Struggle of Tamil Nadu.

The British were able to establish their supremacy in India by dislodging the Portuguese and Dutch. The British were able to establish themselves in Bengal. Their efforts to eliminate the French in their colonial race took place in the Carnatic. The Anglo-French rivalry broke out in the Carnatic in the form of the three Carnatic Wars.<sup>14</sup> At the end of the third Carnatic War the British emerged powerful. After the establishment of their political supremacy the British started the process of consolidation.

The British adopted different policies to consolidate their position. They followed the policy of non-intervention for some years. This was more honoured in breach. The policy of subsidiary system was given shape and introduced by Wellesley. The first of such a treaty was introduced by Wellesley. The first of such a treaty was signed with the Nawab of Carnatic in 1787.<sup>15</sup> Under this system, the subscribing native ruler had to accept the British East India Company as the paramount power in India. He should not employ any Europeans under his service except the British. The native ruler was not to declare war or conclude peace without the approval of the Company. The native ruler had to submit the matters of disputes with other rulers to the Company. The Company would keep a subsidiary force in the territory of the subscribing native ruler. The native ruler had to pay for the expenses of the subsidiary force. The Company agreed to protect the native ruler from any possible threat of peace to his territory. This Subsidiary System attracted many smaller states in India.

The Indian states paid a heavy price for their membership in the Subsidiary system. They paid in cash and ceded territories to the Company. The British Company gained much by this system. It was also possible for the British to keep the other European powers away from the Indian States. In the Nineteenth Century the British, followed the Doctrine of Lapse to acquire Indian territories. Dalhousie divided the Indian territories into three categories namely the independent states, subordinate states and the states created by the Company. Dalhousie declared that the Company had no right to question the adoption of sons by rulers of the first category of states. In the second category of states, the rulers were directed to seek the assent of the Company. The rulers of the states of third category were denied the right to adopt any son. Dalhousie declared the policy of the Company on the question of adoption of a child by Indian Rulers who had no heir. According to him the royal property of the issueless ruler would lapse at his death. The Company would take over the territories in the capacity of the paramount power. This Doctrine of Lapse was adopted in the case of many Indian States and they were annexed.

The Doctrine of Lapse followed by the Company was one of the important cause for the outbreak of the Revolt of 1857. The Queen's Proclamation of 1858 declared that the British Government would not annex any territory in India. The British had different kinds of relations with the Indian rulers. Many Indian Rulers tried to achieve political gain by utilizing the might of the British gun. The British were not only with mighty gun but also

with an aptitude to pursue diplomacy and take over Indian territories. The Indian Rulers were no match to them. Hence the British were able to annex more and more Indian States. Ramnad was a state of the Maravas which had to experience the policies of the British. It responded to the British endeavours in different ways and challenged the British Supremacy and provided stiff native resistance in the Eighteenth Century and its prominent leaders involved in the freedom struggle of the Nation in the first half of the Twentieth Century.

### MARAVAS OF RAMNAD

There are ample evidences to prove that Ramanathapuram Area had been the home of Paleolithic man. Climatic and geographical changes could have driven the pre-historic men to the coastal areas in Ramanathapuram. The archaeological excavation of the area revealed the fact of human existence during the Neolithic age. The recent findings at Alagankulam also confirmed the antiquity of the area.

The Maravas are referred to be the people of Palai land. The Sangam literary works divide the Tamil Country into five natural divisions. Palai is said to be dry like a desert.<sup>16</sup> There are references on the Maravas in *Purananuru and Silapadikaram*. According to the traditions the Maravas of the Ramnad region helped Srirama when he invaded Lanka to defeat Ravana.<sup>17</sup> The words Marava and Maravan are found in the Tamil literary works like *Ahananuru, Purananuru, Perumpannarrupadai, Narrinai* and *Thirukural*.<sup>18</sup> There are also references to the activities of the Maravas before establishing themselves as independent powers.

There is an inscriptional evidence on the victory of Sri Lankan Ruler over the Sethupathis in 1170-1171. During the period of 1489-1490 Chinna Udayan Sethupathi exercised his power in the region. In 1500. Thirumalai Sethupathi caused the renovation of Temple at Rameswaram. These references are found in inscriptions and copper plates.<sup>19</sup>

The origin of the Marava stands as one of the unresolved problems in the History of Tamil Nadu. There is one theory which tries to prove the origin of the Maravas from the Malavar of Ancient Kongu Country. The Maravas are said to have been one of the branches of the Malavar race.<sup>20</sup> *Puruninuru* mentions the name of a Kongu King as the King of Kuthiraimalai near Salem. The work describes him as a Marava. However, many historians believed that Ramnad was the original Homeland of the Maravas. The Maravas are the people noted for their fighting qualities. They used their swords to protect their independence and pursued diplomacy to survive. They rose in revolt against the British. Many of the Poligars of the Eighteenth Century were belonged to the Marava Community. Their independent activities and disturbances to the civil society made the British to pass the Criminal Tribes Act and bring them under the law and administration. Indeed the Kaval system and the Poligar System strengthened the hands of the Maravas of Ramnad and challenged the British hegemony.

Sethu Samudram is the name of the cause-way between India and Sri Lanka. The Marava leaders were given the responsibility of guarding the causeway. Hence they got the name, Sethukavalan (Guardian of Sethu) which means the Lord of the Sethu. Later this got the status of dynastical name. The Ramanathapuram Country had been under the rule of the Pandyas and later it went under the Nayaks. When Muthukrishnappa Nayak restored the throne of Ramnad to Sethukavalan, they were designated as Sethupathis. The Sethupathis became independent in 1710. They were able to survive as independent and sovereign rulers upto 1773. In 1773-1780 it was under the control of Nawab, Mohammed Ali.<sup>21</sup> Then the British established their complete political control in 1795.

To conclude, the Ramnad District of Tamil Nadu is predominantly inhabited by Mukkulathor -Kallar, Maravar and Agamudaiyar castes. They are commonly called as Thevar. In olden days, the Mukkulathor actively involved in martial activities and rendered services to the local rulers. The Kallars and Maravars eked out their living by performing 'watch duties' locally known as 'Kaval System'. The early native resistance of the Mukkulathors to the British expansion and the *Kaval* system hardened the British attitude towards them. In order to check the growing influence of the Mukkulathors, the British invoked the Criminal Tribes Act. This Act very much affected the Mukkulathors, particularly the Kallars and Maravars who involved in conflict with the established authority. After the establishment of British authority in the Ramnad, the British reorganized the

conquered territories into districts for easy civil administration. Besides, the British declared the Kaval system of the Mukkulathor as illegal.

### END NOTES AND REFERENCES

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