



Police System And Transformation Of Criminal Tribes In The Princely State Of Pudukkottai

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Abstract:

Pudukkottai, a Princely State, was ruled by the Thondaimans. While the de jure ruler was Thondaiman, the de facto ruler was the British. As there was no organised opposition to the British, they wanted to maintain and keep peace in Pudukkottai also. But Pudukkottai presented certain sociological riddles like the highly intractable Kallar and Arimalam Korawars. They posed a veritable threat to the affluent Chettiyars. As the native Ruler and Kallars belonged to the same community, bringing the culprits under the administration of impartial Justice seemed very difficult. Taking all these factors into consideration, the British imposed their own system of Police Administration and the Thondaimans readily obliged. Before analyzing the Police Administration in Pudukkottai, it is necessary to know communities that were considered the criminal classes of this State, their status, activities, character, behaviour etc.

CRIMINAL CLASSES

The exigencies of colonial transformation and prevalent European ideas provided the British Rule in India with the frames of reference for the classification of the native population of India. Through an elaborate corpus of revenue, judicial and police records, the British Raj produced for itself a colonial archive, a ready-at-hand knowledge. This vast repository of information helped the British to formulate the manual to face the challenge of traditional, unchanging and to that extent, anticipated behaviour of subject population. Inherent in the production of this colonialist knowledge was the conception of the essential types without history. In 1947, Uttarpradesh accounted for roughly 40 percent of the people who were classified as Criminal Tribes in India¹

The term, professional criminals, means a tribe whose ancestors were criminals from time immemorial and who are themselves destined, by the usage of caste, to commit crime and whose dependents will be offenders against the Law, till the whole tribe is exterminated or accounted for in the manner of the thugs.²

The Indian Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure provided adequate measures for the restraint of professional criminals. The surveillance procedures put excessive powers in the hands of the police.³ An objective outlook on the history of crime reveals the fact that criminals are not born but made.

In Madras, the fact that the criminal tribes depended on their mobility to earn an 'honest living', complicated matters even further. The Lumbadis and Kuravars were transporters-'Carriers' and they were also regarded as a Criminal Tribe. Yet restricting them to one region would deprive them of their honest profession and perhaps force them further into crime. The Madras Government, therefore, saw the restrictions as ill-suited to the Province. There was already in use a system of Police Surveillance, which

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allowed the tribes to pursue their 'honest' professions but kept a close watch over their 'criminal propensities'. Though the Provincial Government did not disagree with the object of the Draft Bill, they merely found it unsuited to their 'Gypsy Carriers'.⁴

This criminal section of the people was described in terms such as "The unskilled and degraded among the unskilled", the unemployed and the degraded among the unemployed, while the honest working men were identified as the respectable working class, the well to do labourers, skilled labourers, and mechanics and skilled artisans'.⁵

The relevance of the police was realised more in Pudukkottai, because of the atrocities of certain classes who were considered "Criminal". The "Criminal" classes were chiefly thought to be the Kallars, the Kuravars, the Kaladies, the Pallars, Maravars, and Valaiyars.⁶ The Kuravars are more or less nomadic. They were known as a set of cautious and elusive thieves, resorting to the less risky and more paying offences. The Kaladies, found generally in the south western part of the State were cattle lifters who resorted to burglary for a change.⁷ The Kallars,⁸ who were numerous in the north eastern and north western parts, were considered professional thieves. Sir Waltor Elliot observes, "they belong to what have been called the predatory classes" and they are known for their, "bold, indomitable and martial habits"⁹ V.A. Smith wrote, "the caste of Kallars or robbers who exercise their calling as an hereditary right is found only in the Marava Country which borders on the coast, or fishing districts. They are not ashamed of their caste or occupation and if one were to ask of a Kallar to what people he belonged, he would coolly answer, 'I am a robber'. This caste is looked upon in the District of Madurai, where it is widely diffused, as one of the most distinguished among the Sudras".¹⁰ Thiagarajan has observed, "their hereditary and traditional habits formed in the earlier centuries of uncontrolled depredation eminently fit them for the trade. To them, thieving is no offence either moral or social, but an occupation compatible with honour, and opening fields for enterprise and heroism. It would appear that one of their customs is to feast and otherwise hero worship any member of their community who returns home from imprisonment. Their offences are generally distinguished by daring, though in these latter degenerate days they are sometimes caught in the company of sneaky Kuravans guilty of petty thieving. They have their own code of honour, and unconquerable attachment to their class which extends to the women and children of the community and survives official overtures of reward and punishment".¹¹ Their homes are situated on both sides of the frontier, so that on committing an offence it is easy for them to cross the line and set the Law of Extradition in motion for the purpose of gaining time or to "leave one locality which has become too hot for them for another locality which has not been recently exploited."¹²

Their happy hunting grounds were partly the rich Chetty tracts, and partly the Districts of Tanjore, Trichinopoly, Madura and Ramnad. The scene of their operations was often the open. The cattle were dexterously driven to inaccessible areas in adjacent jungles and passed from hand to hand till they were safely concealed in some far away bush or underground cellar.

Thiagarajan goes on to say, "Owing to their close-knit clan feeling, their double refuges, their daring and the fear they exercised over the country at large the tracking and bringing to book of these people is by no means easy. In former times, whatever their activities abroad, their criminal propensities at home were restrained through the influence of the Local Servaikars who formed the Kavalkar Watch. These Servaikars were their natural leaders and were reminded of their duties from a strong Government above, the means which they amply possessed to protect the country from robbers and thieves'. It should be added that 'not infrequently', both the Watchers and the Watched 'indemnified themselves by depredations in the neighbouring provinces for the vigilance and abstinence' which they were obliged to exercise at home".¹³

This was the state of affairs during the days of Thondaimans. Raja Vijaya Raghunatha Tondaiman could then proudly say to some visitors to his Capital at one Dusserah that they had to fear only the wild beasts and reptiles in his country, and that otherwise he would be "responsible for the security of their person and property against all other annoyance". And it was certainly not an empty boast. Major Blackburne, who knew the country personally, wrote in 1807, "amongst the numerous representations of acts of violence or oppression which I have received since the commencement of my intercourse with the Tondaimans' Country in the year 1801, I cannot recollect more than one complaint of private theft or robbery". Bayley wrote some 30 years after, "the police being on Kavalgar System is very good crime and litigation are happily little known in the territory".¹⁴

In the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, however, they appear to have become a 'perfect pest' in Pudukkottai and abroad. This was due partly to the gradual weakening and snapping of the old feudal ties, and partly to severe economic distress resulting from centuries of Amani. Under the Amani, there was no chance of rising in the world by fair means', so that men were driven to crime 'for a living during half the year'.

The police organisation was inadequate to keep the criminals under control. Crime was rampant

but it was hardly reported or dealt with, as the Kallars were more than a match for the police. When a serious crime occurred, the usual practice was to put pressure upon some influential member of the criminal class by which a certain portion of the stolen property found its way back to the person robbed and one or two low caste persons, perfectly innocent of or unconnected with the commission of the crime, were tried and convicted. But on the other hand, when a case was on the high road to detection and conviction, the stolen riches were freely made use of in suppressing witnesses or buying over complainants.¹⁵

But the Kallar today does not take to his old job with pleasure. The Kallar has learnt by experience and suffering that it is rather a risky game to play. Again in the words of N. Thiagarajan, "to this feeling several causes have contributed". Of these, the chief is the co-operation of the State and the British Police (in the erstwhile Madras Presidency), which facilitates the tracking of the criminal from lair to lair until he finds no home, and no peace outside the prison walls. Other contributory causes are the registration and observation of known depredators, the identification of criminals by finger-prints and anthropometrical measurements, the incessant, preventive watch that is kept over the criminal tribes, and the deterrent punishments in the case of proved offenders."¹⁶

Other influences of more wholesome nature have also been at work in transforming the ways of these people. "They are principally the Amani Settlement of 1879 which improved the economic condition of the ryot, and created a property in land which anyone was unwilling to risk by criminal offence; the excellent example set by the Nattambadi cultivators who always earn more by honest husbandry than by thieving; and the introduction of the groundnut cultivation which has brought a rich harvest of money beyond the wages of labour and expectation".¹⁷

END NOTES

- 1.Sanjay Nizam, 'Disciplining and Policing the Criminals by Birth' in Indian Economic and Social History Review, Delhi 1990, p. 131.
- 2..ibid., p. 135.
3. ibid., p.9.
- 4.Meena Radhakrishnan, 'The Criminal Tribes Act in the Madras Presidency: Implications for the Itinerant Trading Communities in Indian Economic and Social History Review, 26 March 1989, pp. 271-272.
- 5..Sanjay Nizam, op.cit., p. 157.
- 6..Thiagarajan,N., The Manual of Pudukkottai State , Pudukkottai, 1921, pp. 14-16.
- 7.ibid.
- 8.Kallars, like the Valayars, formed a good portion of the population of the State and numbered 50,689 on 1911. They are divided into a number of endogamous sections called Nadus or men of districts, such as Ambunadu or Anbil Nadu, to which the Family of the Ruler of the State belongs. Alangudi Nadu, Unjanai Nadu, Sottrupalai Nadu, Paliyur Nadu, Valla Nadu, Vadamalai Nadu, Thenmalai Nadu, Kasa Nadu, Usangi Nadu, Kilsenkili Nadu, Melsenkili Nadu, Peruma Nadu, Kulathur Nadu, Virakkudi Nadu, etc. Profitable agriculture has converted most of the Kallars in the State into a peaceful class of farmers. The introduction of ground nut cultivation, which brought a rich harvest of money beyond the wages of labour and expectation, had a significant effect on the transformation of the Kallars.
- 9.Smith, V.A., The Early History of India, London 1967, p. 492
- 10.ibid., p. 493.
- 11.Thiagarajan, N., op.cit., p. 493.
- 12.ibid.
- 13..ibid.
- 14..ibid., p. 418.
- 15.ibid., p. 419.
16. ibid.
- 17..ibid.