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## ABOLITION OF FEUDAL SERVICES AND LEVIES IN SOUTH TRAVANCORE

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### ABSTRACT:

*The article titled **Abolition of Feudal Services and Levies in South Travancore** is an attempt to explore the circumstances that contributed to the abolition of arbitrary levy of feudal services and levies in Travancore. It dwells on the historical background of South Travancore that once remained an integral part of ancient Tamilakam and the erstwhile princely state of Travancore. The region is gifted by nature and remained 'the garden of India' in the extreme south-west of Indian sub-continent. It has been described as the 'brightest land with highest tax'. The non-caste*

*communities like Ezhavas, Nadars, Parayas, Pulayas and Sambavars became the worst victims of the arbitrary feudal services and levies. Some of the feudal services like, uliyam, work without wage, viruthi gratis service to the caste- Hindus, the Government and the uttupuras, free feeding houses for the Brahmins ruined the vitals of the common people. More than one hundred taxes were imposed on the poor people.*

**KEYWORDS:** Travancore, Levies, Kanam Tax, Shaanar Tax, Breast Tax, Poll Tax, Nadars, Saanars.

### ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF FEUDAL SERVICES AND LEVIES

South Travancore, the present Kanyakumari District remained an administrative division of the erstwhile princely State of Travancore. The name Travancore is an anglicized form of *thiruvithamcode* or *sri vazhumcode* that means the abode of prosperity.<sup>1</sup> The state was in other names such as Vanchidesam, and Land of Cheras who had their capital at Thiruvanchikulam. It was also known as Dharma Rajyam, a

land of piety, truth and charity. Later it became Venad or Vanavanad, the land of celestials. South Travancore formed an irregular triangle with its apex at Kanyakumari (Cape Comerin).<sup>2</sup> In the caste ridden South Travancore society, the people were hierarchically categorized into the Brahmins, Nairs, Nanjil Vellalars, Nanjil Pillamars, Ezhavas, Nadars, Parayas, Pulayas and Sambavars. The people who dwelled on the hills of south Travancore are called Kanikkars. Among them the Brahmins, Nairs and Vellalas were categorised as *savarnas* means high caste people who enjoyed all the privileges in the kingdom, others were considered as *avarnas* or

polluting caste i.e. low caste people who suffered under the clutches of high caste supremacy.<sup>3</sup> Nambudiri Bhramin, Tamil Bhramin, Telungu Bhramin, Aiyengar, Potti etc. are the important sub divisions among the Brahmins of South Travancore. The Nairs are generally called "Sudras" but they came under *savarna* group. Among the polluting caste Nadars who were also known as Shannars held the high position in the social hierarchy. They were industrious, simple minded and unskilled labours. Their prime duty was to extract juice from palm trees and make it into jaggery. A few Ezhavas were living in South Travancore who was the agriculturalist, toddy

tappers and coir-makers. It is very pitiable to note that, the polluting caste such as Parayas and Pulayas were believed to be the aborigines of the state. They were bought and sold like cattles, made to starve, flogged like buffaloes made to work all the day for a little rice and were referred as untouchables and unapproachable.<sup>4</sup> The unjust taxes which were collected during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries totally uprooted the economic growth of the lower caste people in Travancore. There were about 118 kinds of taxes collected from the lower caste people such as Nadars, Paraya, Pulayas, Mannans (washer men), Kavathy (barber) etc. Many of the low caste people were unable to pay the tax so they migrated from south Travancore. There was no fixed amount of taxes to be collected<sup>5</sup> and the officers collected the money depending upon the situation, because many of the taxes were imposed by Brahmins and aristocratic Nairs.

The emergence of the feudal system in Travancore was considered to be the beginning of the feudal levies. Feudalism is a socio-economic system that existed in Europe during the middle ages in which the people worked and fought for Nobles in return the latter gave protection to the former and allowed them to use their land. Feudalism was practiced in different style. As far as Travancore was concerned the feudal system was introduced in the shape of *Jenmi* system. Jenmi means one who possessed excessive of lands. This system would have come through the Cholas because it was in the famous Chera-Chola battles known as hundred year's war that accelerated the development of the *jenmi* system.<sup>6</sup> The long war between the Cholas and Cheras which lasted throughout the eleventh century A.D. provided a golden opportunity to the Brahmins to prepare for total mobilisation of the resources of the state. The Nambudiri Brahmins who were at the apex of the social structure functioned as *Uralas* (controller) of the temples. However they used to misappropriate the enormous temple properties and donations and the income derived there from.<sup>7</sup> Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai says that this feudalism-ridden society and the influence of Brahmins have been the results of their economic domination and political mastery.<sup>8</sup> They became the custodians of all arable and waste lands.<sup>9</sup> Usually each *jenmi* had thousands of *kudiyans* under him. The *jenmies* therefore gave their lands to Kudiyans by way of mortgage or lease in a permanent or temporary possession. The lower castes such as, the Nadars, the Ezhavas, the Pulayas and the Parayas were always at the mercy of their land lords who had the right to evict their *kudiyans* at any time they pleased. The taxes levied by the chieftains were point to the injustice and cruelty which they inflicted on the masses. The taxes which had been imposed and collected from the lower castes by the king directly were spending on military and royal expenses. Other taxes filled the treasury of the Nambuthiris and Nairs.<sup>10</sup>

### IMPORTANT FEUDAL SERVICES

*Uliyam*, *Viruthi* and *Uttupura* were the important feudal services forced to do by the lower caste people. *Uliyam* means free service that was rendered to the Government as and when required. The low caste people such as Nadars, Ezhavas, Parayars, Pulayas, Cavathy and Mannans were forced to do three kinds of services to the State, to the temples and in the houses of the upper caste people. They had to clean government offices, carry food and grass for the elephants and horses in the palace and also feed them. They had to hold the lamps in the Hindu temples. They had to dig pits to capture elephants and carry salt from the salt pans to the selling or loading station on head. They had to guard the logs and timber in the forest. For these works they were drawn to far off places away from their families. *Uliyam* service in the state had still more in human stories. The unfortunate classes and their families were forcibly carried away from their huts by the Sirkar peons to be employed for supplying water to public building, bank halls and granaries, carrying milk to the British Residents, watching elephant pits in the dangerous dense forests, thatching public buildings were the jobs additionally forced on them.<sup>1</sup> For these works they were given food and were not given any wages. This was called *Uliyam* or work without wages. The first category was regular service to the kingdom as and when

<sup>1</sup> Petition from the inhabitants of Eranial, Kalkulam and Kuzhithurai Taluks 1828

circumstances required. The second category of *uliyam* service was duties without receiving any remuneration from the state but they enjoyed government lands and the third kind of *uliyam* was required for any land when an important event took place, once in every twenty, fifty and hundred years.<sup>11</sup>

*Viruthi* was another kind of service rendered to the Government, palace, temples and *uttupuras* at free of cost by the lower caste people. *Viruthi* means that the land holders must provide things to the temples, government, officials and the land lords. Those who held temple or government lands were called *viruthikars*. The *viruthikars* were bound to supply things at free of cost in addition to free service.<sup>12</sup> Mostly the government lands were under the control of the *jennies* and sometimes, they distributed the lands to those whom they had affinity or any other relations. These people also became *viruthikars*. There were different types of *Viruthis* namely *Viz-Koothuvvari*, *Pal Viruthi*, *Vedi Viruthi* and *Valla Viruthi*. *Viz-koothuvvari* means the land was given to the persons who sung the songs with trumpets. *Pal Viruthi* means milk given to the temples, *Vediviruthi* means the explosives provided at the time of temple festivals, *Valla Viruthi* means providing small boat services at the time of festival seasons.<sup>13</sup> Under this system the people belonged to the Ezhavas, Nadar, Paraya and Pulaya communities were obliged to supply provisions to the palace, temples and *uttupuras* and to render free graduations service on the occasion of the temple festivals, palace ceremonies and royal tours. Families of these untouchable castes were even allotted to certain *jennies* and *madampies* (feudal lords) who were at liberty, to obtain *uliyam* from such families consisting of twenty five thousand people were directly subjected to this barbaric custom.<sup>14</sup> Beside these obligations, the low caste were forced to do *uliyam* service even on Sundays in the Sarkar lands and then to the feudal lords.<sup>15</sup>

The *viruthikars* had to supply freely the thing such as palm leaves to write, oil, garlands, milk, firewood, vegetables, coconut leaves to feed the elephants, chicken, eggs etc. These things were carried on head to Trivandrum. Those who, failed to do so were severely punished and their belongings were forfeited.<sup>16</sup> For instance, the *viruthikars* of Paravur were asked to supply curd to the temple of Sri Padmanabha Swamy at Trivandrum.<sup>17</sup> One specific item of *uliyam* imposed on the *viruthikars* was the *velakali* performance in the temples on *utsavam* or festival days. *Velakali* was performed twice in a day during *utsavam*. The night function known as *tirumpuvala* was performed only within the temple premises. The *velakali* party consisted of one as Thavilkaran, Mathalakaran, Tappukaran, Kurunkulakaran, Suruthikaran and Kaimanikaran. The local *sthanikars* or feudal lords known as the Valiamadampis, Ceriamadampies, Tirumukkamoillamars and Ottapiras also joined the *velakali* group just to swell its numbers and strength. The Asan and the *sthanikars* were entitled to get remuneration for their services for the *utsavam* in terms of rice-idols, vegetables and travelling allowances.<sup>18</sup> The Tahasildars and Proverthikars were also individually paid. But the poor *viruthikars* were to receive only petty allowances. The next item of *uliyam* service that expected from the *viruthikars* was carrying the images and flags in connection with the *velakali* performance. Another item of personal service was the lighting of lamps was to receive the required oil and wick-stuffs from the Devaswom subordinates and use them for *kuthuvilakku* and *kampavilakku* for lighting. The job of the torch-bearers was to provide necessary torch-lights during sunset and the services later on.<sup>19</sup>

*Uttupura* means free meal centre to feed the Brahmins. It was during the period of King Marthanda Varma the Brahmin domination had reached the zenith of its glory and the king agreed and acted whatever the Brahmin said Brahmins were the priests of all the temples in Travancore. As the priest, they enjoyed all the temple wealth.<sup>20</sup> To feed them, *uttupuras* means free meal centres were started. They were fed in the morning, midday and evening. There were forty two *uttupuras* in Travancore and spent more than three lakhs rupees (present rate is more than 30 crores) per year.<sup>21</sup> The people belonged to the Ezhavas, Nadar, Paraya and pulaya communities were obliged to supply provisions and free manual works and other necessary things to prepare food. The Marathi-speaking Desasthas and Tamil speaking Vaishnavites in Travancore, Tamil speaking Smarthas were the chief beneficiaries of *uttupuras*.<sup>22</sup> Many of the historians like Nagam Aiya, Velu Pillai, Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai and Sreedhara Menon wrote that Free Feeding of Brahmins started during the period of king Marthanda Varma. But there is an inscription inscribed in Vattezhuthu (old Tamil form) in the fifteenth

century, on the back side of the Sivan Temple (on the rock) at Maruthancode just three kilometres away from Kuzhithurai in Kanyakumari District, about the donation the lands by the wealthy people to feed the Brahmins.<sup>23</sup> From this inscriptions we find that, the custom of feeding the Brahmins were not from the period of Marthanda Varma, it had been practicing even from the fifteenth century. It is said that Sri Mulam Thirunal stopped the free feeding to the Brahmins, to meet the expense to construct the Pechiparai Dam in Kanyakumari District.

### ARBITRARY TAXES IMPOSED ON THE LOW CASTE IN SOUTH TRAVANCORE

The low caste people of South Travancore suffered under the oppressive taxes imposed by the Travancore government during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These taxes strangled the neck of innocent low caste people. Apart from the taxes imposed by the government a few other taxes were imposed by the Brahmins and Nairs without the knowledge of the Government.

The poll tax was implemented by King Rama Varma in A.D 1781 during the Mysorean invasion on Travancore. The money collected through this was spent to meet the military expenses.<sup>24</sup> Any persons aged 16 to 60 had to pay the poll tax for himself and for the each member of the family which forced lot of Nadars emigrated to Tirunelveli. The government then went to the extent of collecting the amount of the tax from the representatives of the families thus emigrated. This tax was collected upto A.D1815.<sup>25</sup> There were series of taxes called *Kanam* taxes mostly affected the Nadars Community (primarily Palmyra climbers) which was collected by Nambudiris and aristocratic Nairs called *Jemmies*. For using ladders to climb the trees they have to pay *Thalaikkanam*, *Kuzhikkanam* for fresh lands under cultivations<sup>26</sup>, *Ilanthal Kanam*, which was due to the next sale of male member, *Adukkala kanam* tax was collected from the ladies of the house, *parakkanam*-fees was levied for measuring the paddy, *cheria parakkanam* fees was collected to use full *parah* at the one set of every measurement and *alakkada kanam* tax was at the end of every measurement. Marthanda Varma imposed the new tax called Shannar tax on Nadars once he crowned the throne. Severe punishments and tortures were given by the authorities for those who unable to pay the tax. Women in the absence of their husband were tortured severely<sup>27</sup>. Another inhuman tax imposed on low caste people was Breast Tax. The low caste ladies aged from sixteen to thirty five years had to pay the breast tax. An Ezhava lady<sup>28</sup> called Nanjeli at Cherthalai in Kerala who was unable to bear the humiliation of the caste Hindu tax collectors, cut off one of her breasts and presented it to them and died. Remembering this incident, presently this place is called Mulachipparambu.<sup>29</sup>

### PUNISHMENTS

All above taxes were collected by different types of methods. Those who failed to pay the tax were subjected to heavy punishments. In these situations if the Nadars were just suspecting for committing crime, they were given more hard punishment. Some of the punishments were breaking hands and legs, cutting nose, hammering (or) piercing nails into body, killing the people using elephants to be trampled, soaking in water executing etc. But all these punishments were considered slighter<sup>30</sup> as quoted by Bartholomeo.<sup>31</sup> Confession, mutilation, impalement were given for theft, unchastely, and other minor offences death were also common. Sometimes the police also made cases against the low caste people and punished them.<sup>32</sup> Even if the taxes were paid, receipts were not given and forced them to remit again.

Terrible pain on the innocent culprits was inflicted by using a machine called kitti. Lot of inhuman punishments were inflicted on the low caste people like Sprinkling chilli powder in the eyes, tearing the person into two portions using bending tree, placing edge sharpened stones in the Head, beating brutally etc. Another noticeable feature was if the low caste people failed to pay tax, the upper caste imposed fines on the arrears. Failing to pay the tax and fines the people were made to sit in a circle surrounded by fire and sharpened rods. Having no way to escape they would die there<sup>33</sup> or else the women of the family was caught, made them naked and put them in cages in which spears were set. If they failed to pay again, they would be beaten brutally. No one would question even if they died.<sup>34</sup>

Severe punishments were inflicted on those who refused to do *uliyam* services. Torture was common feature. For instance, the Nadars who neglected to supply jaggery for public works were put into cages armed with spikes and made to eat quantity of salt with a little rice, or chained to trees like monkeys. It is a record that a Christian in Nanchil Nadu was severely beaten for his refusal to carry plantain leaves and fish to a British Resident on Sabadh Day.<sup>35</sup> Another painful incident accrued when the head man and the others of the village of Kulathuvilai Pakuthi ordered the Christians of Kothavilai near Colachal to contribute some money for the purpose of celebrating a festival in their village temple.<sup>36</sup> The Christians at Kothavilai refused to pay the customary offering to the temple. There upon the head man and others demanded them to pay some money at least as a present to the newly appointed *Kala Visarippukkaran* who was managing the above festival. They further urged that such a present to the *Visarippukkaran* would secure them special favour by exempting them from their usual services to the idols. The Christians however did not yield to this demand and the head man took them to the Kala officer who caused one of the Christians named Yovan to be tied to a tree and inflicted on him severe blows. He also forced him to write a *kchittu*, a receipt to pay tax for toddy. Yovan was not being able to bear the torture of the *Visarippukkaran* paid him the tax. Though he was released, the other Christians by name Narayana and Maraperumal had the fire-locks hanging for nearly two hours on their ears. All the above mentioned incidents had hurt the innocent low caste people of Travancore, they began to oppose it. The result was peasants raised their angry against the government and upper caste people.

### ABOLITION OF THE FEUDAL LEVIES AND TAXES

Ringletaube received several complaints about the feudal services and levies that caused him great trouble. The activities of the officers and upper caste people created discontent among the peasants to an alarming extend. They vehemently protested against forced labour on several occasion. In connection with the Utsavam in Meenum in the temple at Ampalapuzha the Viruthikars refused to conduct Velakkali and hence the temple authorities were compelled to entrust the Valakkali to the provertikars.<sup>37</sup> The *Viruthikars* allotted to Tekkedattu Bhattadiri also refused to perform their duty even after several warning. The annual ceremony of Sri Padmanabha Swmy Temple the cooks of the Temple struck work.<sup>38</sup> Many belonging to the oppressed classes became converts to the Christianity to escape from the *uliyam* and *viruthi* services. The converted Christians began to revolt against the Government by disobeying the rules and not going for *uliyam* services.<sup>39</sup> Bhagavan Muthukutty one of the greatest social reformers of 19<sup>th</sup> century in South Travancore quoted the following in his holy book, *Ahila Thirattu* about these taxes. It says that ,the unjust king has imposed taxes even for *thaali* (*mangal sootra* –wedding chain),dry leaves, cattle, wood ,Palm tree, etc...,to the Santor and their *arival* (the sickle shaped sword) and unjustified taxes even for jaggery of the *Valamkai Uyar Santor*. He said that the Vedas, Trimurthis, the gods cannot bear these cruel deeds against the children of gods and he assured the people that he would take away the throne of evil one.<sup>40</sup> He asked the people to stand united, resist the evil, and to offer the right way of worship, not bowing down to the idols and to the Brahminical way of ritual pomp.

With the continuous efforts of Christian missionaries and the strong support of Col. Munro, the then Resident of Travancore Rani Parvathy Bai issued a proclamation in 1815 which excepted the Non-Hindu Viruthikars from supplying the provision to the temples and State charities. In 1816 another proclamation was issued, according to which every one under that domination was exempted from Sirkar *uliyam* service and exempted to furnish provisions to the pagoda and the public houses.<sup>41</sup> Col. Munro published an order that no one should take any of Protestant Christian subjects for doing any duties relating to pagodas and temples.<sup>42</sup> A proclamation in 1815 relieved the Christians to do *uliyam* service in Hindu temples. As per the proclamation issued in 1821 all the converted Christians were exempted from the *uliyam* because of the continuous agitation made by Rev. Charles Mead. The regular complaints from the missionaries and the people, the Resident of Travancore appealed the king to abolish such levies. As a result in 1835 these taxes were abolished and poll tax was permitted to continue.<sup>43</sup> Thus Rani granted permission to everybody to live according to their religion and

Christians should not be compelled to do free duties related to the Sirkar works.<sup>44</sup> More over the Rani declared that the officers should oblige those Christians who had obtained free hold lands did duties as others of the same work. But the lands were taken from them and were given to others who were willing to do their duties.<sup>45</sup> This exemption of the Christians from *uliyam* service brought many non-Christians to Christianity.

The efforts of Rev. Ringletaube, Rev. Charles Mead and other Christian missionaries created awareness about the unwanted taxes imposed on the low caste people and brought the matter to the Travancore Government and Col. Munro. The result was Rani Gauri Parvathy Bai issued the proclamation in 1817. According to this proclamation the low caste were exempted from the taxes such as, net tax, hair tax, Christian festival tax etc. Also the queen issued an order that, no officer should impose any tax without the consent and knowledge of Resident Col. Munro.<sup>46</sup> A Royal proclamation in 1818 permitted all the low caste people to wear gold and silver ornaments.<sup>47</sup>

Another order was issued in 1847 which permitted all the people to make tile roof. During the time of Charles Mead low caste people were compelled to supply milk to Brahmin houses. The government paid for the milk instead of the Brahmins at the rate of *chakkaram* for one and half measure of milk. However this money never reached the milk producing poor people. The officials and others connected with the payment were high caste people who exploited the money. When Rev. Charles Mead came to know the fact that the poor were thus exploited by the government officials he protested against them. In consequences of this protest, the Travancore ruler issued an order for the sake of the low caste people.<sup>48</sup>

### CONCLUSION:

The whole system of taxation was arbitrary, unscientific and barbarous. The burden of taxes mainly fell on unprivileged classes who suffered very much from the oppression of the government and the caste Hindus. These filthy taxes geared the people into poverty and starvation. Many of the people migrated to neighbouring countries because they could not pay the tax. The oppressed people were systematically excluded from all position of power and were subjected to exploitation and humiliation. But the arrival of British East India Company in Travancore and the establishment of political relation with the king was a turning point in the life of the Travancore people. The political conditions were very conducive for the work of Christian missionaries. The social order prevailing in Travancore especially South Travancore in the beginning of the ninetieth century was favourable for the advent of the protestant missionaries. They ushered in a new era of thinking based on rationalism and liberalism. This endeavour certainly helped people to improve knowledge of the world and imbibe modern western ideas. The restless services of the missionaries with the sincere support of British Residents of Travancore helped the oppressed people to be freed from the repressive taxes. The English education and the evangelisation kindled a spirit of renaissance in the minds of these down trodden people. They got enormous courage to oppose the upper caste and their supremacy. The abolition of feudal levies and taxes marked the beginning of a social revolution in Travancore.

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