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ORIGIN OF THE PRINCELY STATE OF PUDUKKOTTAI AND THE RISE OF THE TONDAIMAN RULERS

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ABSTRACT

Another vestige of the Vijayanagara Kingdom was the minor principality of Pudukkottai (which translates to new fort) established by the Tondaiman Kallars. By the middle of the Seventeenth Century, a Tondaiman Chief had forged a military alliance with the Maravar Setupathi rulers of Ramnad. He then engaged in strategic marriage, uniting his family with that of his Setupathi ally, thus raising his standing above rival factions. Through a detailed and insightful analysis, it is revealed that the Tondaimans transformed from minor chiefs known for their banditry into small kings. Due to their timely military contributions, in 1801, the British recognized them as an internally self-governing princely state. Ultimately, Pudukkottai evolved into a theatrical state as dominant British colonial officials orchestrated rituals and conferred honours in a performance that lacked true involvement from the subordinate Pudukkottai prince.



KEYWORDS: *Vijayanagar, Pudukkottai, Ambukkivil, Tondaimans, Kallars, Vellalars, Chola, Pandya, Padikaval, Padaiparru, Arasukkaval.*

INTRODUCTION:

Historically, much of the State was covered in vast forests and jungles. Veduvars, or hunters, and later Kurumbar, were the first inhabitants of these arid regions. Situated in the very heart of the lands of the Pandya and Chola Kingdoms, Pudukkottai held greater emblematic and strategic importance than many other mixed-economy regions with similar ecological characteristics.¹ This buffer zone feature persisted due to Pudukkottai's location between the Marathas of Tanjore and the Maravas of Ramanad.

Following the Veduvars and Kurumbar, the Vellalars established themselves in Pudukkottai. Over time, individuals from other castes were also came to these areas. Conflicts arose between the Konadu Vellalars and Kanadu Vellalars concerning land and temple rights. These disputes weakened their standing, leading to a decline in their significance.² Consequently, the Maravas eventually became dominant in the southern region of the state, while the Kallars were predominant in the northern area

of the river Vellar. The Vellar in of the Pudukkottai region formed the traditional boundary of the Chola and Pandyan Kingdoms. ^{2a}

From the Sangam period through the Second Empire of the Pandyas, the inhabited territory of Pudukkottai functioned as a buffer zone between the Chola and Pandya kingdoms. Various regions of the state were governed by different chieftains³, who were later assimilated into the Chola dominion. The Chola Era saw significant peasant colonization.⁴ Internal conflicts destabilized the rural areas, contributing to the downfall of the Second Pandyan Empire. The subsequent Muslim incursions created uncertainties regarding personal and property security.⁵ Inscriptions discovered at Adhanur and Rankyam referenced the threatening actions of the Muslim rulers.⁶ Exploiting the prevailing chaos, local chieftains established minor principalities. Their rivalries and conflicts plunged the lives of the peasantry into a state of distress.⁷

Inscriptions indicate that following the Tenth or Eleventh century, portions of the northern Vellar came under the control of various chieftains known as 'Araiyaars'. The influence of the central authorities of the Cholas and Pandyas was minimal in these regions. ⁸

The previous structures of village and local assemblies experienced a decline in strength or at least diminished significance. The gap left by the weakening of local assemblies and the lack of a strong ruler was filled by the Araiyaar Chiefs. They gained power by seizing *padikaval* (protection) rights at the expense of the local people. They insisted on receiving their dues in both goods and cash for providing protection to a locality.⁹ They emerged as *arasukkavalkar* through kinship ties and the misappropriation of *Padikaval* rights. They allocated lands to their followers, as evidenced by the presence of several *Padaiparru* (cantonment villages) in Kiranur, Virachilai, Kurunthenpirai, Kottaiyur, Lambalakudi, Pulivalam, and Ilanchavur. The Araiyaars were frequently associated with specific *Padaiparru*. ¹⁰

Kumara Kampanna's conquest of Madurai and the dominance of the Vijayanagar rule did not eradicate the diverse Araiyaar chiefs, which included the Pallavarayars, Vanadhirayars, Tondaimans of Aranthangai, and the chiefs of Parambur, Illuppur, and Marunkapuri.¹¹ Their *padikaval swathananthiram* represented more than just a payment for services rendered. Their *arasukkaval* was recognized by the leading community in the area. In reality, the Araiyaars were essentially the clan leaders of their respective regions, acting as 'little kings' and they carried out the royal activities in the vortex of a cultural lag.¹² The Vijayanagar rulers allowed a degree of autonomy to the local chiefs, who began to assert their authority when the central power of the Vijayanagar Empire was weak and unstable.

Initially, a group of petty chieftains settled in and around Karambakkudi. The Tondaimans consolidated their authority and position by claiming *padikaval* rights. Their recognition as *arasukkavalkars* was attributed to their physical strength and ability to wield force. Reports indicated that criminal chieftains and mercenaries from the Kallar sect went so far as to damage even public infrastructure such as ponds and dams. Villagers lived in fear of their destructive actions. As a result, instead of resisting, they submitted and allowed the clan of *Kallars* to rule them.¹³ However, this dominance did not mean they constituted a numerical majority in various regions of the state.

According to tradition, several families originally residing near Tirupati in the ancient kingdom of Tondaimandalam are believed to have migrated from there to establish a colony in what was once the State of Pudukkottai.¹⁴ The inhabitants belonged to the Kallar caste known as Tondaimans and initially settled in the village of Ambukkivil. By the late Sixteenth Century, different areas of the Pudukkottai tract were under the rule of the Nayaks of Madurai, Tanjore, the Setupathis of Ramanad, the zamindars of Marungapuri and Manaparai, as well as the Pallavarayers of Pudukkottai. It is likely that the Tondaimans inherited the legacy of the Pallavarayers.

The Anbilnadu Tondaimans migrated to Ambukkivil, accompanied by ten tribes, with an additional two tribes from the Kallar groups joining them. They held the belief that one of their ancestors, Raya Tondaiman, was born from the union of Lord Devendra. It is said that the Tondaimans temporarily paused at Anbilnadu, a village located to the east of Tiruchirappalli, south of Tanjore, and north of Ramanad, before finally settling in Ambukkivil. Alongside the Tondaimans, no other tribes established themselves in Anbilnadu. The ten tribes included Manikkiran, Pirppanrikondram,

Mentttarayan, Tondaiman, Kaliyiran, Panrikodan Kaduvetti, Pallavarayan, Rangiyar, and Porpanrikondran.¹⁵ After their settlement in Anbilnadu, two additional tribes of Kallars, Adaiyavalanjan and Kalingaran, joined them. The entire group then dispersed in various directions.

According to the *"Tondaiman Vamsavali"*, Devendra, the King of Heaven, encountered a maiden during his earthly travels and took her as his wife.^{15a} From this union, a ruler was born, who was the ancestor of Tiruman, Namana, Pacchai, Dandaka Namana, Tirusna, Namana, Pacchai, Namana, Pacchai, Kinkini, Dandaka, Tiruma, Pacchai, and Raya Tondaiman.¹⁶

During the visit of Sri Ranga Raya, Avadai Raghunatha Tondaiman from this family provided assistance. In return, the King conferred upon him the title of 'Raya' in 1639. Avadai Raghunatha Tondaiman successfully conquered Pallavaraya and established the foundation of the Pudukkottai State. It is known that he ruled under the title of Ragunatha Raya Tondaiman and assisted the Nayaks of Tanjore and Thirichirappalli. Subsequently, they served Kilavan Sethupathi (1673 - 1719). Kilavan Sethupathi married Kathali, the sister of Ragunatha Tondaiman.¹⁷ The fort of Tirumayam and surrounding areas were granted to the Tondaiman by Kilavan Sethupathi, which is why Ragunatha Raya Tondaiman is regarded as the principal founder of the Pudukkottai State.¹⁸ Ragunatha Raya Tondaiman (1686-1730) was succeeded by a line of rulers including Vijayaragunatha Raya Tondaiman (1730-1769), Raja Ragunatha Tondaiman (1769-1789), Raja Vijayaragunatha Tondaiman (1789-1807), Raja Vijayaragunatha Raya Tondaiman (1807-1825), Raja Ragunatha Tondaiman (1825-1839), Raja Ramachandra Tondaiman (1839-1886), Raja Marthanda Bairava Tondaiman (1886-1928), and Raja Rajagopala Tondaiman (1928-1948). The Tondaimans promoted the Telugu language. Vijaya Ragunatha Tondaiman¹⁹ constructed the Dakshina Moorthy Temple in his palace and became a follower of Sri Sadasiva Brahmendra.²⁰ He invited Brahmins who settled them in his state, which was known as *Chaturvedi Mangalam*. The Tondaimans supported Brahmins and the Sanskrit language, while Tamil was designated as the official language of the state in 1848. A school for English education was established by the government, and Christian missionaries commenced thirteen English medium schools.²¹ They renovated canals and ponds, contributing to agricultural development. For administrative purposes, the state was divided into three taluks: Alangudi, Thirumaiyam, and Pudukkottai. The State Darbar records were maintained in Lathur.

Although Pudukkottai Town, the capital of the state, has existed since 1738, it was largely devastated by a significant fire in 1812. With assistance from Major Backburne, Raja Vijayaragunatha Raya established a square layout for the town, featuring wide streets and a centrally located palace. The town is situated on a slope that descends from the Machuvadi forest ridge in the north to the Vellar River in the south. Sri Seshaiyah Sastri contributed to the town's infrastructure by implementing storm water drainage systems, conservancy lanes, well-constructed roads, deepened tanks, street lighting, and buildings for public offices, schools, a college, and a jail. A jail had already existed at Thirumayam fort since 1810, and a town jail was constructed in 1830. The Princely State of Pudukkottai was established by Vijaya Ragunatha Tondaiman (1730-1769) through the amalgamation of the Pudukkottai and Kulathur regions in 1750 A.D. The early rulers of the Tondaiman dynasty, through protective rights and a network of kinship, laid the foundational framework for the Pudukkottai Kingdom, which persisted until 1948 A.D.

Around the time Raghunatha Raya Tondaiman ascended to power in Pudukkottai, Namana Tondaiman began his rule over Kulathur. The Nayak ruler of Madurai sought and received assistance from Namana Tondaiman to subdue certain rebellious Poligars of Tirunelveli.²² In gratitude, the Nayak King, Ranga Krishna Muthu Virappa (A.D. 1682-1689), granted Namana Tondaiman a tract of land surrounding Kulathur, taken from the territories directly governed by the Nayak Kings.²³ The Kulathur Tondaiman was referred to as 'Chinna Tondaiman.' Namana Tondaiman and his descendants rose to prominence through the annexation of Parambur, Kattalur, Visenginadu, Viralimalai, and Ammankurichi.²⁴ By approximately 1750, the Kulathur Kingdom was incorporated into Pudukkottai and ceased to exist as an independent state.²⁵

When the Nayak dynasty came to a close and the Muhammadan ascended to power.²⁶ The Nawab of Arcot, Anwar-ud-Din Khan and his successors, maintained the same amicable relations and bestowed upon the Tondaiman the title of 'Bahadur'²⁷, which had been passed down through the family.

Consequently, the Tondaiman was permitted to maintain 1500 cavalry.²⁸ Raghunatha Raya Tondaiman passed away in 1730 and was succeeded by Vijaya Raghunatha Raya Tondaiman (A.D. 1730-1768).²⁹

To conclude, the King of Pudukkotai was not inherently divine; instead, it was the royal attire and ornaments, referred to as the 'Rajah's magic clothes,' that transformed him into an earthly deity. This transformation occurred in three distinct phases. Firstly, in the ancient past: the modest Tondaiman family ascended to the throne in Pudukkottai by demonstrating a series of valorous deeds; these actions illustrated that the Tondaimans possessed divine capabilities, and each act was rewarded with a new piece of royal 'clothing' (such as a title, land, regalia, or even actual garments). Secondly, in the more recent past: upon his coronation, each King of Pudukkottai participated in a ceremony akin to the one that consecrates a new idol in Tamil temples. Professor Waghorne posits that just as a disembodied god inhabits its idol, which then becomes that deity despite being composed of humble materials, the *sakti* or power of the Tondaimans' protective goddess Brahadmbal entered the human king during his installation, thus granting him 'a form fit to rule'. Lastly, in the late colonial period, the reigning king, adorned in his royal garments, bestowed *darshana* upon his subjects.

End Notes

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25. *Ibid.*, p.34.
26. *Ibid.*, p.18.
27. Aiyar, Radhakrishna, S., *op.cit.*, p.144.
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