
The Poligar System in the Tamil Country : Its Origin and Growth.

**by
By C. S. Srinivasachari, M.A.**

Professor of History, Pachaiyappa's College , Madras

*[A paper read at the Eleventh Public Meeting of the Indian Historical
Records Commission, held at Nagpur in December 1928]*



This was published by the Government Of India Press – Calcutta in 1929 .

***It is being brought back to e-book format in memory of Prof.C.S.Srinivasachari by
VenuGopalaswamy Educational Trust (VGET) – Hosur , Tamilnadu, India in 2011***

The Poligar System in the Tamil Country : Its Origin and Growth.
(By C. S. Srinivasachari, M.A.)

The Madura country, as organised by Visvanatha Nayak, the son of Nagama Nayak, and the founder of the Nayak rule of that region (cir 1529-1564 A. D.) stretched from Cape Comorin to Valikondapuram on the north and from Coimbatore, Erode, and the Western Ghats Rameswaram and the sea on the east, according to the Mrtyunjaya Manuscripts¹ translated by W. Taylor. Visvanatha and his chief co-adjutor, Ariyanaatha (or Ariyanayaga) Mudali who combined in himself the double offices of commander-in-chief and prime-minister (Dalavay and Pradhaani) were very efficient administrators and restored order in the country by the institution of the Paalaiyam² system of administration as the most practical solution of the difficulties. Visvanatha was trained in the administrative system of the Vijayanagara Empire and "made his mark in applying its principles in a systematic manner". The chronicles of the time attribute a larger share of constructive work to Ariyanaatha than even to Visvanaatha, in the matter of the establishment of the Palaiyakar (Poligar) system.³

The number of Poligars in Tinnevely and Madura is considerable even to-day; and the title is said by Colonel M. Wilks to have been given by the Vijayanagara Kings to the chiefs of the Telugu colonies planted in the neighbouring provinces for the purpose of overawing the original inhabitants. Visvanatha Nayak had brought with him to Madura a large number of his own dependents and adherents whom he had to reward; besides these there were the old hereditary Tamil chieftains and the Telugu adventurers who had previously settled in the land and whose good-will it was necessary for him to secure; and above all there were the impoverished and discontented adherents of the ancient Pandyas whom he had practically abolished as well as "the bold and turbulent Canarese and Telugu adventurers who had seized with a strong grip the northern and western divisions of country".

¹ J Taylor-Oriental Historical Mss. (1835), Vol. II, pp. 117-8; and Satyanatha Aiyer -- History of the Nayaks of Madura; 1924-pp. 55-56.

² "Although the system was not completely new, in as much as we find some Palalyakarans in the southern country before the enthronement of Visvanaatha nevertheless to him was due its institution as a permanent and efficient body for the administration of the country and for the defence of the Capital."-H. Heras. The Aravidu Dynasty Vijayanagar; (Vol. I), p. 134. The Palayam system grew up in the Mysore and Carnataca regions as well and spread even up to the Ceded Districts.

³ These Poligars, predecessors of the present Zamindars of Tinnevely; Ramnad Madura and Tricinopoly districts, still look upon Ariyanaatha as a sort of patron saint, and in the words of Nelson (The Madura Country, A Manual; 1868-Part III, page 90) pray to him as the founder of their order. Tradition makes much of him and his equestrian statute in the Puthu Mantapam at Madura was erected by the greatest of the Nayaks and is still crowned with garlands by the hero-worshippers of to-day. His achievements are summarised by Taylor (Oriental Historical Mss., Vol. II, pp. 15 et seq.) and by Nelson, according to whom "if he (Ariyanaatha) lived long enough, he lived not one moment too long". Aryanatha died in 1600, in ripe old age, after having been at the helm of nearly half a century.

The Poligar system was the solution of Visvanaatha and Ariyanaatha of the difficult problem of reconciling the conflicting interests of all these classes; its object was to enrich and ennoble the most powerful of each class, and at the same time to secure their and their descendants' allegiance.⁴

The details of the scheme of the institution of Poligars as given in the chronicles are thus condensed by Nelson. There were 72 bastions to the fort of Madura and each one of them was now formally placed in charge of a particular chief who was bound for himself and his heirs to keep his post at all times and under all circumstances. He had to pay a fixed annual tribute and to supply besides a quota of cavalry and troops and maintain peace over a particular tract of country. In return he was given charge of a number of villages proportioned to his rank as well as the title of Paalaiyakaran (Poligar), besides other valuable gifts and privileges. The sources of Nelson's information are now somewhat discounted in their historical value. "All that can be regarded as probable is that the existence of the Poligars as a class dates from the period of the commencement of the rule of the Nayakas. Very few of the Zamindars (the principal exception is the Sethupathi of Ramnad) can claim that their estates or chief-ships were conferred upon them, prior to the Nayaka period by the old Pandya Kings".⁵

⁴ The term poligar is peculiar to the Madras Presidency; and "the persons so called were properly subordinate feudal chiefs occupying tracts more or less wild and generally of predatory habits in former days; they are now much the same as Zamindars in the highest use of the term. The word is Tamil Paalaiyakaran, the holder of a Paalaiyum or feudal estate; Tel. Paalegadu; and thence Mahr. Palear; the English form being no doubt taken from one of the two latter".-Yule and Burnell-Hobson-Jobson-New edition by W. Crooke (1903, p. 718). In Tamil the word Paalaiyam means the country or district of a feudal chieftain-a camp, or town, or village surrounded with stones; and Paalaiyappattu means a town or village governed by a Poligar or his estate. (M. Winslow; A Comprehensive Tamil and English Dictionary of High and Low Tamil (1862), p.766.)

Poligar according to Wilson (A Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms of British India; 1855; p. 391) means a petty chieftain in the south of India especially in Carnatic, occupying chiefly tracts of hill and forest, subject to pay tribute and service to the paramount state, but seldom paying either, and more or less independent, subsisting in a great measure by plunder these have now subsided into peaceable land-holders.

The Poligars founded by the dynasty of the Madura Nayaks are known by the name of Southern Poligars; many of them are of the Totier caste and preserve the language of their ancestors as distinct from that of the Tamils. (Vide Mark Wilks: Historical Sketches of the South of India in an attempt to trace the History of Mysoor; 2nd Edn., Vol. I, p. 34, note.)

Caldwell gives the literal meaning of Palaiyakara as the holder of a camp and secondly as the holder of a barony or military tenure. The English seem to have taken their favourite name Poligar, not from the Tamil Paalaiyakara, but from the Telugu Paalegadu, or the Canarese Paalegara, the meaning of which is the same. Similarly the Anglo-Indian word Pollam (Poligar's holding) is derived rather from the Telugu Paalemu than from the Tamil paalayam. (History of Tinnevely-p. 58.) According to the Fifth Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company (1812), Vol. II. Madras Presidency-the Poligars were military chieftains bearing a strong affinity to the Zamindars of the Northern Circars, whose origin may be traced to similar events and causes. Some were leaders of banditti or freebooters, others derived their descent from ancient rajahs or from those who held high offices of trust under the Illidu dynasties (ed. of 1866, Vol. II, pp. 88-89).

⁵ H Calunull-A Political and General History of the District of Tinnevely, 1881, pp. 57-58. -

A list of the names of the chiefs actually appointed by Visvaaatha and Ariyanatha can be made out from the materials contained in Ward's Survey and in the two lists published in Taylor's Oriental Historical Manuscripts (Vol. II, pp. 160-8) as well from an unpublished Mackenzie Manuscript. Many of these chiefs are called Nayakkars⁶; one is a Reddiyar, another is a Tondaimanar and others are Kaunder, Servai, Tevar, and Nayanar. The actual number must have frequently fluctuated. Taylor's list divides the fiefs into nine sections, beginning with the kingdom of Malayalam (Travancore) and the principalities of Ramnad, Sivaganga, and Pudukkotta, which were "like adopted children of the Madura Government".⁷ Ramnad was founded in the year 1605 by Mthukrishnappa rather restored to the ancient line of the Sethupathis-guardians of the Isthmus of Rameswara, (according to the manuscript history of the Carnataka Governors, and the account of the Sethupathis, translated by Taylor and the historical memorandum furnished to Nelson by Ponnuswamy Thevan, the then manager of the Zamindari). The ancient line of the Sethupathis had always been dependent on the Pandya and had been in existence for centuries before Sadeika Thevan Udaiyan Sethupathi was crowned as Sethupathi by the Nayak; and Sivaganga was an off-shoot from Ramnad; and it dates as a Zamindari only from about 1730 A. D.; from which time Ramnad came to be known as the Great Marava, and Sivaganga as the lesser Marava or Nalukottai. The Tondaimans of Pudukkotta got first into prominence on account of their services to the Nayaks; and Pudukkotta, was given the same rank as Travancore, Ramnad, and Sivaganga-the, four being called the adopted sons of the Kings of Madura", while the other chieftains were called Paalaiyakaara servants.

Dr. Caldwell condemns the system of poligars as having been productive of great evil; for down to the period of their final subjection and submission to British authority in 1801, whenever they were not at war with the central power, they were at war with one another; and it was rarely possible to collect from them the tribute or revenue due to the central authority without a display of military force which added greatly both to the

⁶ The Tottiyars are, according to H. A. Stuart, writing in the Madras Census Report of 1891, a caste of Telugu cultivators settled in the districts of Madura, Tinnevely, Coimbatore, and Salem; and they are probably the descendants of Poligars and soldiers of the Nayakkan Kings of Vijayanagar who conquered the Madura country about the beginning of the 16th century. The traditional story of their migration to the Madura district is given in several of the Mackenzie Manuscripts. They are also called Kambalattans, and they reverence the Pongu Tree (*Pongamia Glabra*) and believe themselves to have originally lived north of the Tungabhadra river from where they migrated and took service under the Kings of Vijayanagar. There are two sections of them, cultivators and petty Zamindars and those who wander about begging and doing menial work. They are divided into endogamous sects, and their most important sub-divisions correspond to the Telugu Gollas and Yerragollas. (Thurston and Rangachari-Castes and Tribes of South India, 1909, Vol. VII, pp. 183-197.)

⁷ Besides the first section comprising these, the second section contains the palaiyams of Ariyatur (Malava Rayar or Nainar, Turaiyur (Reddiyar), Iluppaiyur, Kulattur, and Kattalur-Perambur. In the succeeding sections are included the paalayams of Periyakulam, Sivagiri, Ettaiyapuram, Seitur, Uttumalai, Kadambur, Maniacchi, Talaiankottai, Singampatti, Urkadu, Kuruvikkulam, Palani, etc. The list should have been subject to perpetual fluctuations, being "increased or diminished with the absence or existence of any one preponderating power among them". -Wilson's Historical Sketch of the Kingdom of Pandya (Eng. Tamil Ed.)-p. 43.

unpopularity and the expense of the collection. The Poligar considered his territory as a Paaliam or encampment, and the Nayak rulers and their successors (the Nawabs) did not attempt to exercise or even to claim the right of exercising civil or criminal jurisdiction in the limits of his poligars' dominions. If his tribute were paid and his feudatory sent him assistance in his wars, his demands were satisfied.⁸

In the time of the famous Tirumala Nayak, (1623-59) the greater part of the lands constituting the several territories under his rule were held as military fiefs by the Poligars; the Sethupathi of Ramnad (the Great Marava of early Anglo-Indian historians) did him homage, but paid no tribute and the ruler of Travancore paid tribute only when compelled; and the others were held under a fairly firm grip.

Every considerable town and village in the Nayak Kingdom was fortified and garrisoned with regular troops, artillery, trained elephants and horses; and a dalakartan was in charge of the defences of each town and responsible for its safety. Madura was also under a dalakartan who commanded the garrison and the police of the capital and became a most powerful official before the commencement of the 18th century. The Poligars in order to perform their military duties effectually, were to keep in perpetual readiness a kind of militia properly equipped for service and ready to take the field at a moment's notice. "This militia was exceedingly numerous, in fact nearly all the able-bodied ryots resident in the Poligar's dominions were militia men and liable to be called out whenever there was danger of invasion or a prospect of foreign service". Some of the nobles other than the Poligars, who lived at the capital, held large estates subject to military service and maintained regiments of infantry and cavalry. Some of the Poligars were placed in authority over others and they were made answerable for the good conduct of their subordinates. Thus the Sethupathi of Ramnad was the head of a section of them; the Poligar of Dindigal was the chief of 18 Poligars and "occupied a most distinguished position in the time of Tirumala". Whenever troops were required by the Nayak for military operations the Dalavay (Dalakartan) of Madura sent requisitions to such and such Poligars, to furnish so many armed men within a certain time; the Poligars immediately sent round orders to the dalakartans and headmen of the towns and villages; and on the day named, or soon afterwards, the levies were ready for service and in marching order. In times of pressing necessity the Sethupathi and every great leader of men in the kingdom would be called to arms, and swarms of troops would hurry to the king's assistance from every quarter. The soldiers of the Poligars were mostly ryots supporting themselves by lands granted to them rent-free on condition of rendering military service and received only batta when on march; while the expense of maintaining them in efficiency was very trifling. The defects of such an organisation

⁸ A very considerable portion of the country south of Trichinopoly had thus passed into the hands of the Poligars. Hardly anything remained in the hands of the sovereign in the Madura and Dindigul regions; while all the country north of the Tamraparani river was in the hands of Poligars. The Palaiyam organisation likewise spread into the Carnatic and Mysore regions as well.

have been well pointed out by Nelson.⁹

The Poligar's men exercised police duties not only in their own villages but presumed to protect the property of the inhabitants and travellers in the adjoining villages and roads. This extension of authority wholly based on encroachment was converted into a pretext, "for the most severe oppressions of the people in the form of fees and ready money collections".¹⁰ They also claimed rights over lands in the circar villages which they presumed to hold as rent-free. This was partially caused by the fact that the Pollam lands were indiscriminately intermixed in many places with the circar villages and to some extent caused by the Poligars being allowed by the Nawab's Government to farm the lands in those villages. They frequently ejected the ryots from the lands of which they themselves held the inam rights and acquired a permanent interest in the kaul villages.

⁹ Apart from the lack of training and discipline characteristic of such troops "they were kept in order only so long as their leaders continued to be animated by a common hope of plunder and personal advancement, or restrained by a common fear of the enemy, or of the king's vengeance. A jealous quarrel among the leading chiefs or the retirement from the scene of action of one or two Poligars, who fancied themselves slighted or ill-used, would be amply sufficient to break up a force in the presence of the enemy or even in the very hour of success. Consequently however numerous might be the king's battalions, however brave his generals and officers, he could never for a single moment feel absolutely safe or regard even the slightest indications of disaffection with indifference. This was a fatal obstacle in the way of Madura becoming a first-rate Hindu Power and ultimately, as we shall see, contributed not a little to the bringing about her downfall". (The Madura Country, A Manual; Part III, p. 158).

¹⁰ The power exercised by the Poligars of the Carnatic (the dominions of Nawah Muhammad Ali) in regard to police and the manner in which it was exercised either to raise revenue or to augment their influence is described in the report of Mr. Lushington, the Collector of the Poligar Peshcush in the Southern Districts, dated 20th August 1799. The Poligars collected two sorts of fees, as district-watchers and village-watchers. The village fees known as Tallum Kaval were of a much older creation than the Poligar's influence and authority, "being coeval with the establishment of villages and constituting the feud for the support of the tallian; or officers of police". The Poligars had so encroached upon and assumed these rights that more than four-fifths of the villages in Tinnevely had come under their influence and their peons had superseded the tallians or retained them on condition of receiving from them a share of their perquisites. The Desha Kaval or district watching-fees originated either from a grant of the ruler or from the voluntary action of the villagers, who, being unable to protect themselves, submitted to such contributions. In later times these were levied by the Poligars from defenceless villagers as the price of forbearing to plunder them.

"These contributions consisted in payments of money, grain, plough, or cattle, and various other articles, and were made by armed peons detached from the fort of the Poligar for that purpose; they were not regulated by any fixed principle; but the amount depended upon the conscience of the Poligar; and when the payment of them was resisted or not quickly submitted to it was enforced by torture and the whip; the whole village was put into confinement; every occupation was interdicted, the cattle pounded, and the inhabitants taken captive into the pollam, lands or murdered The fees and collections thus made on account of the police, were exclusive of other assessments to which the inhabitants of the neighbouring circar villages were subject equally with those in the pollams, under various pretences such as hunting, batta, marriage expenses, and presents" :-The Fifth Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company (1812), Vol. II, Madras Presidency (1866 edn.), pp. 89-90.

When the Poligars of the Carnatic including the Southern Districts were transferred to the control of the Company in 1792 by a treaty concluded with the Nawab,¹¹ the Company regarded them as usurpers of authority, but subject to the Nawab whose camp they were bound to attend whenever they were summoned with a military force proportioned to their power and territory. They had been a perpetual source of violence and distraction to the weak government of the Nawab upon whose officers they frequently retaliated. He had frequently tried to interfere with them but not to much purpose. As early as 1756, i.e., soon after Muhammad Ali was firmly established in the Nawabship, the English resolved to take more decisive action with regard to the political settlement of the Madura and Tinnevely country. Orme describes in a detailed and admirable manner the desultory warfare that had to be waged by the "Company officers, Caillaud and Yusuf Khan, who, according to Malcolm, was the bravest and ablest of the native soldiers that ever served the English in India "-against the Poligars and their tools, the Mussalman adventurers from the Nawab's court. In 1760 Hyder Ali, having made a secret alliance with the French, fought with some Poligars whose estates lay between Dindigul (already in the possession of Mysore) and Trichinopoly. Yusuf Khan made himself very powerful in Madura, subdued most of the Poligars, over-ran the Sivaganga and Ramnad countries and even exacted tribute from the Rajah of Travancore. The capture of Pondicherry by the English in January 1761 and the departure of Mahfuz Khan, the rebellious brother of the Nawab, from the Tinnevely country where he was so long giving trouble, had damped the rebellious ardour of very many Poligars. The subsequent rebellion of Yusuf Khan, his besiegement in Madura by an army of English soldiers and Maravas, and his subsequent execution which at this distance of time seems all but inexcusable, should not blind us to the fact that it was for the first time during his governorship of Madura, the tribute from the Poligars was regularly collected, the property of individuals was secured from the depredations of the Kallars (the Colleries of Orme) and the public revenue was greatly augmented.¹²

The subsequent administration of the Madura country under the Nawab continued to be troubled as before, while the situation grew worse after Hyder's celebrated invasion at the Carnatic in 1780. The campaign of Col. Fullarton in 1783 into the country south of Trichinopoly following on the Assignment Treaty of 1781 produced some quiet as was reflected in his report of 1785 on the state of the country.¹³

After the Company took up the management of the Carnatic, the Court of Directors

¹¹ Schedule o. 1, showing the list of Poligars with the amount of their respective tributes or peshcush, according to the 5th article of the treaty and article 3 empowering the Company to garrison all the forts in and exercise full authority over the Carnatic in Aitchison.-A Collection of Treaties, Engagements, and Sanads relating to India and the Neighbouring Countries, Vol. X (4th Edn., pp. 49 and 54-55).

¹² John Sullivan's Tracts upon India, 1795 (p. 142) quoted as Appendix F in S.Charles Hill's Yusuf Khan, the Rebel Commandant,. (1914).

¹³ A view of the English interest in India (Republished in Madras in 1867)

issued a despatch in 1795 in which they entered into a very full discussion of the principles underlying the treaty of 1792 and of the rights acquired by the Madras Government to reform the administration of the Poligar possessions. An interesting report was submitted by the Board of Revenue on this subject in 1797 and a minute was afterwards recorded by Lord Hobart in which he pointed out to the Court of Directors the means by which the Poligars might be rendered useful subjects and obedient tributaries of the British Government. The Directors expressed their agreement with the views of Lord Hobart, and in the despatch of 5th June 1799 insisted on "the absolute suppression of the military power of the Poligars and on the substitution of a pecuniary tribute, more proportionate than the ordinary peshcush to the revenues of their pollams, and more adequate to the public demands for defraying the expenses of general protection and government".

The Collectors of the Southern and Western Poligar countries were ordered to report fully on the military establishments of the Poligars and the mode of their maintenance as well as on the revenue and other resources of each Poligar, and on the nature of the various oppressions to which the inhabitants were subjected. The events preceding Major Bannerman's expedition on the so-called Bannerman-Poligar War which centered round the conduct of Kattaboma Nayak, the Poligar of Panjalam-Kurichi, convinced Government that the time had come to fully and finally vindicate their authority and quell the rebellious spirit that was beginning to spread; but they temporised a little till Seringapatam was taken and their anxieties had vanished. Major Bannerman restored peace in soome measure; but within two years there had to be waged another Poligar War which has been well described in the Military Reminiscences of General Welsh who was Staff Officer to the Commander throughout the campaign. After the final suppression of this rebellion Government, in a proclamation dated 1st December 1801, suppressed the use of all weapons of defense and promised besides a general amnesty a permanent assessment to the Poligars on the principles of Zamindari Tenure. According to Bishop Caldwell, writing in 1881, the most remarkable of the changes brought about is that of the Poligar himself. "The Poligar has become a Zamindar and has changed his nature as well as his name. One can scarcely believe it possible that the peaceful Nayaka and Marava Zamindars of the present day are the lineal descendants of those turbulent and apparently untamable chiefs of whose deeds of violence and daring the history of the last century is so full. One asks also: can it be really true that the peaceful Nayaka ryots of the present day are the lineal descendants of those fierce retainers of the Poligars? The change brought amongst the poorer classes of the Maravas is not perhaps quite so complete, but many of them have merged their traditional occupation of watchmen in the safer and more reputable occupation of husbandmen; and it may be fairly said of the majority of the members of this caste, that though once the terror of the country, they are now as amenable to law and reason as any other class".¹⁴

¹⁴ A Political and General History of the District of Tinnevely (p. 219).