

Nanchilnadu as a Cock-Pit of Warfare – A Historical Study

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Abstract

Nanchilnadu, as an independent political entity has no vast relevance to the period of study, only limited sources are available about the early history of Nanchilnadu. Throughout, it was in turn captured and retained by the Ays, Pandyas, Cholas, Venadu and Vijayanagar rulers. Nanchilnadu located in the southern portions of the land and it was the cock-pit of South Travancore. Because, most of the early rulers frequently conquered the land to fulfil their destination. So, this research paper tries to highlights the early political condition of Nanchilnadu under various neighbouring rulers.

Introduction

Nanchilnadu is bounded by the Mahendragiri Mountain on the north and east, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea in the South and the west respectively. Pannivaykkal which runs through Aloor, Veerani, Vembanur from the north to south was once the western boundary of Nanchilnadu. Mangalam is often referred to in inscriptions¹ and Ola documents as forming the northern limit. Manakudi is also referred to as the southern extremity of Nanchilnadu instead of Cape Comorin. These fertile pieces of land seem to be a well-fortified one in ancient days.² There is a ruined fort between Vattakkotta and Kadukkarai leading to the present fort of Aralvoimozhi. The debris of a majestic fort seen here testify to the fact that once it well defended the land from repeated invasions by the Pandyas and Cholas. Near Vattakkottai ruins of two other forts are visible even now. Another fort running northward is seen situated in the village of Kottayadi. Probably this may be the bounds of Purattathanadu³ mentioned in inscriptions and ancient Tamil Literature.

The northern tracts of Nanchilnadu are rugged and hilly. Here the mountain ranges are very high and steep. The Mahendragiri Mountain with an elevation of 2500 feet and running southward from Bhuthappandi to Aralvoimozhi hills has prevented frequent incursions into Nanchilnadu from the east and has thus acted as a natural wall of protection.⁴ South of Aralvoimozhi, the Ghats, represented by a number of isolated hilly masses, finally tail off towards Kanyakumari. The important river Palayar about 100 yards wide-flows⁵ through the

Manakudy Estuary into the Arabian Sea. The vast plain west of Nagercoil and south of Aralvoimozhi has a large number of salt pans. The pans at Manakudy were famous even during the period of Rajendra Chola (1012 – 1044).⁶Most of the famous temples located in Nagercoil, Kottar, Vadiveeswaram, Oluginasseeri, Vadaseeri, Suchindrum, Parakkai, Terur, Eraviputhur and Mylady. These temples expressed the influence of the great Cholas, Pandyas and Vijayanagar empires. Every village in Nanchilnadu except for certain topographical variations, is a verdant paddy field. Hence Nanchilnadu has become famous as the ‘granary of Travancore’.⁷

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study highlights on the following

1. To find out the rulers who were ruled Nanchilnadu during the period Sangam age to 14th Century A.D.
2. To carry out the invasions of Pandyas, Cholas and Venadu rulers in Nanchilnadu.
3. To assess the war bases in Nanchilnadu.
4. To evaluate the war achievements of Raja Raja Chola, Rajendra I, Parantaka I, Vira Kerala Varma in Nanchilnadu.

Nanchilnadu under the Ay kingdom

The earliest rulers of Nanchilnadu, about whom we have some reference are the Ay kings. They were probably ruling over the region around the Pothiyil mountains, the southernmost section of the western Ghats.⁸ Ptolemy states that the territory of the Ays flourished in the south of the Chera kingdom and extended from Nelcynda to Kumari and the Pandya kingdom lay only ‘past Komaria’.⁹ Robert Sewell discourses that the Ays were the rulers of the hill-country of South Travancore.¹⁰ Ayakkudi near Aralvoimozhi, Idalakkudi and some place names near Amsi give some dim but concrete clues regarding the Ay kingdom of the Sangam Age. The important Ay kings who ruled over Nanchilnadu are Ay, Andiran, Titiyan, Atiyan, Titiyan II and Nanchil Porunan.¹¹ Ay Andiran is said to be an independent ruler of the region that extended over the mountainous tracts from Coimbatore gap in the Western Ghats down to Kanyakumari in the south.¹²

During the reign of Titiyan, the neighbouring Pandya kingdom was ruled by the king Bhuthappandiyan. The Sangam literature does not mention that any war between Bhuthappandiyan and Titiyan. But it seems that an understanding was arrived between the

two kings in respect of accepting Bhutappandi as the western limit of the Pandya kingdom in the time of Atiyan, the Ay kingdom began to disintegrated. Alikiyapandiyan is said to have invaded the kingdom of the Ays and defeated Atiyan and reduced him to the position of a tributary chief of the Pandya king. Paranaar, the Tamil poet has described this historical fight in the Ahanuru and sings of the victorious flag of the Pandyas, flying on the top of the Pothiyil hills.¹³

Nanchilnadu under the influence of Pandyas

They Ays after being defeated by the Pandyas, struggled in vain to regain their lost independence and their supremacy over the Pothiyil region. 'TalalayalkanathuSeru Ventra Nedunchliyan' who came to the Pandyan throne during the reign of Titiyan II, repulsed the latter in the battle of Talalayalkanam. Thus, the battle of Talalayalkanam sealed for ever the fate of the Ay kingdom. This heroic fight of Talalayalkanam has been briefly described by Nakkirar in the Ahananuru. As a result of the battle of Talalayalkanam, the Pothiyil region was broken up into petty kingdoms.

After the discomfiture of the Ay kings, certain regions of Nanchilnadu remained under Pandya rule for several centuries. The Pandya king Sendan (645 – 670 AD) invaded Nanchilnadu. His son Arikesarimaravarman (670 – 710 AD) achieved victorious at Kottar and captured it.¹⁴ This clearly shows that he conquered certain portions of Nanchilnadu which were not Pandya authority. He completed the annexation of Nanchilnadu to the Pandya kingdom. Kochidayan (710 – 740 Ad) who succeeded Arikesari is said to have defeated Ay Vel, who held sway in the western ghats region in the battle of Marudur. The Ay king was forced to acknowledge the Pandya supremacy. Perhaps Kochidayan extinguished the last vestiges of the authority of the Ays in Nanchilnadu and thus completely asserted the Pandya supremacy over the whole of Nanchilnadu.

During the reign of Maran Cadayan (765 – 815 Ad) the Ay ruler again seems to have re-asserted his independence in the neighbouring region to the north, including a portion of Nanchilnadu and the Pandya king had to wage a war with Ay Vel. The Latter was defeated and his country annexed.¹⁵ Not satisfied with this victory, the Pandya king marched against the Ay king, Karunadan, probably the successor of Ay vel. The result of this battle is not known; but -it is unlikely that the Ay ruler was completely subdued by the Pandya ruler. In

this encounter Karunadan was assisted by the Cheras and the Pandya army was drive back as far as Karaikkottai which is identified with Aralvoimozhi.¹⁶ About 900 Ad Rajasimha II succeeded Vira Narayana. That he continued to be in possession of Nanchilnadu is attested by his inscriptions which are found in large numbers in this region. But about 900 Ad., the Pandya ruler was defeated by Parantaka Chola I. thus Nanchilnadu continued to be under Pandya domination for nearly five decades.

Nanchilnadu under the invasion of Cholas

About the beginning of the tenth century Ad Nanchilnadu was annexed to the Chola Empire by Parantaka I (907 – 955). His inscriptions are found in Nanchilnadu especially in Suchindrum.¹⁷ He defeated Maravarman Rajasimha, the Pandya king. Parantaka captured Kanyakumari and extended his kingdom upto Suchindrum as is testified by the Suchindrum Inscription of Parantaka Chola I, which records the gift of fifty sheep for maintaining a perpetual lamp before the God of the temple at Suchindrum. But it was only in the reign of Raja Raja I, the greatest of the Cholas rulers (985 – 1016 Ad) that Chola authority was firmly established over the whole of the Pandya Empire including Nanchilnadu.¹⁸ His hegemony was accepted even beyond the northern boundary of Nanchilnadu. In commemoration of his great victory over the Pandyas, he renamed Kanyakumari as Rajarajeswaram. Rajaraja seems to have consolidated his southern conquests by constituting the newly acquired places into a separate administrative unit called Raja Raja Pandianadu.¹⁹ Kottar which was the southernmost military outpost in the Chola dominion was named Mummudisolanqallur and a Chola garrison was permanently stationed there.²⁰ Thus by the end of the reign of Raja Raja Chola, Nanchilnadu became an integral part of the Chola kingdom.

Raja Raja was succeeded by his son Rajendra I. he made Cholapuram his capital²¹ and governed the far-flung provinces through viceroys. He appointed his son, Jatavarman the first viceroy over the Pandya territory and for about fifty years the southern part of the Pandya region, including Nanchilnadu came to be governed by the Chola-Pandya viceroys.²² The rule of the Chola-Pandya viceroy's lasted for nearly sixty-five years at the end of which this system was finally abolished by Kulottunga I.

Kulottunga I (1070 – 1118 AD) the first of the Eastern Chalukya Chola Emperor, came to the throne and was closely associated with Nanchilnadu. An inscription at

Thirukkalukkuntram refers to his victories against the 'five Pandyas' and captured of the region round the Pothiyil Hill and also destruction of Kottar.²³ He was opposed to the sharing of power with the Viceroys and hence unified it under greater control from the centre. He introduced a new system of military cantonments at various strategic places, one such unit was kept at Kottar in Nanchilnadu.²⁴

In the reign of Kulottunga the Western Chalukyas and Hoysalas achieved several victories over Cholas, northern portion of the Cholas came under their sway. Taking advantage of this disaster Parantaka Pandya over-ran Kanyakumari easily. He is also said to have occupied Nanchilnadu and even marched up to Vizhinam and Kandalur Salai and captured them. Depending on the Kanyakumari Inscription of Parantaka Pandya one cannot but take for granted that the Pandya king was successful in his campaign against Nanchilnadu and even against Kupaka, the Venadu ruler.²⁵ The loss of Nanchilnadu in the south appreciably weakened the Chola power which was soon dislodged by the Venadu rulers.

In the history of Nanchilnadu during the transition from the Chola authority to that of the Venadu rulers is covered by thick mist of historical uncertainties. On the strength of an inscription on the Pandya Anai or the dam on the river Parali, Nagam Aiyar records the achievements of a Kupaka ruler. This ruler is identified by Velu Pillai with a Venadu ruler of the first quarters of the 12th century A.D.²⁶ This inscription also records that a Kupaka ruler conquered Kottar and seized the whole of Nanchilnadu from the Pandya king Rajasimha about 1116 A.D. Legend²⁷ and fact have been so inextricably interwoven that it is difficult to say where fiction ends and truth begins. According to Shungoony Menon, when Travancore conquered the Pandya kingdom while under Muhammadan sway, Nanchikkuravan took Nanchilnadu and became its ruler.²⁸ The reference to Muhammadan rule of the region seems to be a chronological error for there is hardly any Muslim invasion of South India till 1310 A.D.²⁹ T.K. Velu Pillai takes cognizance of the story in concluding that Vira Kerala Varma (1126 – 1140 A.D) had to defeat Nanchikkuravan before taking Nanchilnadu. K.K. Pillay disapproves the authenticity of this story and rejects it as a legend. However, it is evident from inscriptions and other sources that Venadu came to establish its supremacy over certain portions of Nanchilnadu in the first quarters of the 12th century A.D. and continued with fluctuating fortunes under the Venadu kings.

Nanchilnadu under the influence of Vijayanagar Empire:

Nanchilnadu has always been an apple of discord between Travancore and Vijayanagar. It was during the reign of BhutalaVira Udaya Marthanda Varma (1561-1536) that a major war broke out between Venad and Vijayanagar.³⁰The occasion that participated this serious conflict was the capture of certain territories by the Venad ruler in the Tinnevely District. Moreover, Vira Narasimha alias Chellappa, a refractory feudatory of the Vijayanagar ruler, had taken asylum in Venadu following one futile revolt against his master. By giving protection to Chellappa, BhutalaVira incurred the displeasure of the Vijayanagar Emperor Krishna deva Raya. The Pandya king Sri Vallabha who wished to take advantage of this strained relations between the Venadu and the Vijayanagar rulers, offered to assist the latter against BhutalaVira. Meanwhile Krishna Deva Raya died and was succeeded by Acyuta Raya. Soon after his accession, Acyuta Raya undertook an expedition to the south. He reached Srirangam and from there sent an army against Venadu. The forces of Vijayanagar and Venadu met on the banks of Tamraparani in AD 1532. Acyutaraya is said to have installed a pillar of victory on the spot and married the daughter of his ally, the Pandya King. He received tribute from the Venadu King. Thus, “the triumph of Vijayanagar in the conflict of AD 1532 is by no mean open to doubt”. But it might be said that though the Venad ruler was defeated, he continued to exercise his authority over Venadu.

The second invasion of Venadu by the Vijayanagar forces took place during the rule of Sri Vira Kerala Varma (1544-45). This time the scene of conflict was Nanchilnadu itself. The casus belli according to Fr.Heras was the withholding of the tribute by the ruler of Venadu. The immediate cause of the expedition, however, was the threat to Vijayanagar sovereignty posed by the increasing influence of the Portuguese over the Paravas (Hindu fishermen) of the fishery coast. This expedition was led by RamarayaVitthala., the Vijayanagar viceroy at Madurai., and his brother ChinnaTikka. The Vijayanagar army which entered Nanchilnadu through the Aralvoimozhi Pass, met the forces of Venadu at Kottar in Nanchilnadu. About the outcome of the encounter, we have only the oft-repeated story of how Francis Xavier appeared in front of the invading force with a crucifix in hand and commanded them to retire, whereupon they retreated in utter confusion. But as no battle is mentioned, it is possible that Xavire introduced on behalf of the king of Venadu and brought about a rapprochement. T.K Velu Pillai however, claims that “the Vijayanagar army

was ignominiously defeated at Kottar in AD 1544”, and that “the invaders were driven away by the bravery of the Travancore troops and the resolution of their king”. But a close study of literary and epigraphical sources of the period clearly indicates the victory of Vijayanagar. Two inscriptions at Suchindrum support this view. The inscriptions of Ad 1545 states that Vitthala constructed the Gopura in the temple of Tiryvenkatanatha. The other inscription dated to AD 1547 records a gift to TiruvenkataEmperumen for the victory of Vitthala over BhutalaVira Rama Varma, the Venad ruler. These inscriptions clearly show that Vitthala’s authority spread over Nanchilnadu and that the Venadu rulers has accepted the supremacy of the former. Another inscription of the TripatiDevasthanam, records the grant of a village near Tamaraparani by the Venadu king for conducting ceremonies in the name of Vitthala. The Krishnapuram plates of Sadasivaraya dated AD 1568 refer to Krishnappa, who assisted Vitthala against Venadu, as the “Lord of Kanchi and Ailavalipena, who defeated the king of the DhiruvatiRajaya”. The Literary sources like “Ramarajayam” and “Yadavabhyudayavyakhya” support the epigraphical evidence. It is clear from the above facts that Unni Kerala Varma must have negotiated peace with the invaders through the mediation of Xavier, recognising the supremacy of Vijayanagar. But the treaty embodying the peace proposal was ratified only in AD 1547, Unni Kerala Varma having died in the meantime.

Unni Kerala Varma was succeeded by Rama Varma (1545-1556). It was Rama Varma who concluded the treaty with Vijayanagar. There seems to have been constant quarrels among the different Svarupams of the royal family during his time. It appears that several districts of Tinnevely were still in the possession of the Venadu ruler in spite of the recent conflict with Vijayanagar. According to the Jesuit sources, Vitthala made a second attack on Venadu in the year AD 1558. The Venadu forces very easily repulsed the attack, and during the panicky retreat a large number of the Vijayanagar army is stated to have been butchered. Fr. Heras believes that Vitthala himself was killed during the retreat, as his name is no longer mentioned either in local inscriptions or in contemporary Jesuit writings. This argument is chiefly based on the evidence of a ballad, the ‘Iravikkuttippillaippattu’ which gives the heroic deeds of the Venadu general in the battle against the Madura forces before his death on the battlefield.³¹

Conclusion

Nanchilnadu as an independent kingdom had fired the ambition of several conquerors from very early times because of its bounteous wealth. The Ay kings later made it part and parcel of their empire. Subsequently, it fell under the influence of the Pandyas, Cholas, Vijayanagar and Venadu rulers. From point of view of the permanent interest of Nanchilnadu though Venadu undeniably played a greater role the contributions of the Tamils cannot be overemphasised. But as Nanchilnadu had long been a cock-pit warfare it was left bleeding and prostrate for long. The recrudescence of pillage and wanton cruelty wreaked on the inhabitants, as a natural accompaniment of war, made them rot under frequently changing masters. Such was their condition until Venadu took over hegemony in Nanchilnadu.

¹Vadaseeri Inscription of Kollam 873, No.71, (Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol.V, p.210.)

² V. NaganAiya, (1906), *The Travancore State Manuel*, Trivandrum, Vol.III, p.591

³Inscription of Sundra Chola Pandya, (Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol.VI, Part I, p.151.) (From the ninth century AD., if not earlier Nanchilnadu was practically divided into two havels of which the southern portion was known as Puratthayanadu.)

⁴S.RamanathaIyer, (1953), *A Brief Sketch of Travancore*, Trivandrum, p.21.

⁵L.Ward and Conner, *Geographical and Statistical Memoir of the Survey of Travancore and Cochin States*, Trivandrum, p.2.

⁶T.A.S., Vol.1, p.163.

⁷K.K.Pillay, (1953), *The Suchindrum Temple*, Madras, p.7.

⁸Sivaraja Pillai, K.N.,(1943), *The Chronology of the Early Tamils*, Madras, pp.112-116.

⁹Rajaraja Varma Raja, M., 'Some Travancore Dynastic Records', (K.S.P., Series-1, p.27.)

¹⁰Robert Sewell, (1932),*Historical Inscriptions of Southern India*, Madras, p.361.

¹¹Sreedhara Menon, A., (1962), *Kerala District Gazetteers*, Trivandrum, p.104.

¹²ElamkulamKunjan Pillai, P.N., (1970), *Studies in Kerala History*, Trivandrum, p.166.

¹³*Ahananuru*, Stanza, 162.

¹⁴K.K.Pillay, *op.cit.*, p.21.

¹⁵Ramanatha Iyar, A.S., 'The Aruvaymoil Pass or the open gateway of Travancore', J.I.H., April 1925, p.7.

¹⁶Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol.IV, pp.120 – 123.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, XIV, pp.237-238.

¹⁸NilakantaSastri, K.A., (1955), *The Cholas*, Vol.1, Madras, pp.104-105.

¹⁹Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol.VI, p.188.

²⁰Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol.VI, Part 1, P.2.

²¹Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol.III, p.198.

²²K.A.NilakantaSastri, *op.cit.*, p.231.

²³H.R. Pate, (1917), *Madras District Gazetteers*, Tinnevely, Vol.1, p.50.

²⁴An inscription at Cholapuram dated in his 29th regnal year mentions 'KottaruNilappadi'. (Travancore Archaeological Series, No.XIV, p.247.)

²⁵Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol.II, pp.6-15.

²⁶T.K.Velu Pillai, (1940), *Travancore State Manuel*, Vol.II, Trivandrum, p.294.

²⁷According to legend one Konanikuravan by a spell of magic became enormously rich and usurped power in Nanchilnadu. He ruled for 35 years and was succeeded by his son Bhommayyakuravan. Bhommayyakuravan was followed by Nanchilkkuravan. Under Nanchilkkuravan the whole of Nanchilnadu came under his sway. But later on, when Nanchilkkuravan wished to get his son married to the daughter of Vellala chief, named PeriyaveettuMudali, who occupied the highest position among the people, he was treacherously killed. It is said, PeriyaveettuMudali, who promised to give his daughter in marriage to the son of Nanchilkkuravan, played a trick on the day of the marriage and caused the death of all the Kuravas by letting the marriage mandapa collapsed by a special device. Then PeriyaveettuMudali became the master of the region.

²⁸P.Shungoony Menon, (1878), *A History of Travancore*, Madras, p.92.

²⁹K.K.Pillay, *op.cit.*, p.32.

³⁰ Krishna Ayyar, K.V., ((1965), *A Short History of Kerala*, Coimbatore, p.93.

³¹ K.K. Pillay has rejected the authenticity of the ballad and proceeds to say that even if it is given some credits, the death of the Venadu general on the battle field must have spelt the doom of the fighting forces, resulting in their defeat. (K.K.Pillay, *op.cit.*, p.112)