

K.K. Pillay And His "The Early History Of Nanchilnad" - A Study

Dr. C. ANBAZHAGAN

Assistant Professor in History
Arignar Anna Govt. Arts College
Attoor, Selam District.

K.K.Pillay contributed much for the reconstruction of history of South India. Among them "The Early History of Nanchilnad", "Suchindrum Temple – A monograph", "Studies in the History of India with special reference to Tamil Nadu", deserve special mention.

As per Dr. K.K. Pillay's point of view the history of Nanchilnad has not been reconstructed in a systematic manner so far on the basis of the entire available data.¹ Till now, it has received little more than a left handed treatment at the hands of writers of Travancore History. The reason for this circumstance was that early historians of Travancore viewed Nanchilnad as an integral part of that country. For example writers like Pachu Muthatu, Shangunny Menon, Nagam Aiyya and T.K. Velu Pillai had the tendency of not giving proper attention as well as an objective presentation with Nanchilnad. But significantly Nanchilnad has all the time constituted a distinctly separate unit, socially and culturally different from the rest of Travancore which had woefully ignored them. A systematic utilization and a proper interpretation of the Tamil sources, literary and epigraphic are essential in a scheme of true reconstruction of south Indian History. Nanchilnad has played an important role in the history of south India for almost all the leading dynasties of south India which were associated with Nanchilnad at one stage or another.²

In this paper, an attempt has been made to highlight the contributions made by K.K.Pillay for the reconstruction of the early history of Nanchilnad. "*The Early History of Nanchilnad*" is the greatest contribution of the Dr.K.K.Pillay to South Indian History. In this book, he gave more informations about Nanchilnad.³ It was the first historical work about Nanchilnad which is useful for the study of Nanchilnad.

Nanchilnad is situated in Kanyakumari District, the southern most end of the Indian Peninsula. The area of Nanchilnad consists of the modern taluks of Agastewaram and Thovalai. It is bounded by Mahendragiri hill on the north and Tirunelveli district on the east, by Kalkulam taluk of Kanyakumari district on the west, and the confluence of the Arabian

sea, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal on the South-West, South, and East respectively.⁴ The coastal line of Nanchilnad extends over 30 kilometers. It is almost regular except for some points of land projecting into the sea at Kanyakumari.

From the literature and inscriptions, we find that the southern region comprised several ancient territorial units known as Purathayanadu, Venadu, Kurunadu, Padappanadu, Nanchilnad, Mudalanadu, Valluvanadu, Thenganadu etc. Among them, Nanchilnad and Venadu were most famous.⁵ Purananuru, a Sangam work gives a fine description of Nanchilnad in several poems.

Venadu was the nucleus of the erstwhile Travancore state. The word Venadu is derived from the words Vel and Nadu. Vel and Ay refer to the same people. It is very clear from Purananuru, that Vel was the family name of the Ays.⁶

Purananuru mentions that Ays ruled over the region around *Pothiyamalai*. Nanchilnad was a battlefield of several kings like Cheras, Cholas, Pandyas, Nayaks and Ay rulers. Culturally the region is rich, because it accommodates different faiths in her bosom. Politically it was a cockpit of the south.⁷ In the field of literature, the contribution of Nanchilnad is unique. It has a long history going back to the Sangam age.

Geography

Regarding the recent researches on Nanchilnad, K.K.Pillay's interpretation is believed to be the forerunner. He says that geographically Nanchilnad is significant, for it marks the confluence of the three Oceans, the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. The Western Ghats ending into green hills, rivers, and lotus filled tanks, dense forests, extensive paddy fields, rich coconut groves and the curved coastal line are the unique natural features of Nanchilnad.⁸

On physiographical grounds, K.K.Pillay interprets that the region can be divided into mountainous terrain, low lands and undulating valley. The mountainous terrain consists of north and north-western parts of Nanchilnad. The coastal line of this region is flat and fairly fertile. The area between the mountainous terrain and the coast is the undulating valley with a few streams. The paddy fields of the low lands with large patches of plantains and tapioca fields give an enchanting sight along with the sea coast, which is rich in minerals also.

Geology and Minerals

The minor group of rocks of this area is the Khondalites and Charnockites. Deposits of heavy minerals like limonite rutile, zircon, leucexene, sillimanite, garnet and monazite occur along the western coast of Nanchilnad. Besides the red loam, sandy deposits are found in some places on the coast.

Hills and Rivers

According to K.K.Pillay, Nanchilnad is found at the foot of the Western Ghats with a few hill ranges. The mountainous tract is worth mentioning which rises to a height of 4400 feet above the sea level with isolated peaks. Mahendragiri hill rising to a height of 5427 feet above the sea level is the most important hill in the Thovalai taluk of Nanchilnad.⁹

The rivers of this region are non-perennial and short. The river Paraliyar raises from the Mahendragiri hills and flows into the plains of this region. The Paraliyar now known as Palayaru in this region is said to be same as Pahruli River in the lost Lemuria continent. From the poetic inscription found in the Pandyan dam on the river Palayaru, the dam is mentioned as Paraliyathu Anai. The submersion of the old river Pahruli and Kumarikodu surrounded by a row of mountains under the sea is mentioned in Silappathikaram.¹⁰ The artificial Mukkadal Dam and the natural salt water lake at Manakudy in Nanchilnad are most important.

Natural Vegetation

The north and north western parts of Nanchilnad are covered by forests. Trees of economic value are found in the forest such as teak, rosewood, anjali, vengai etc., Tea and cardamom plantations are done on the higher elevations, while pepper, rubber and ginger flourish in the lower levels.¹¹ The hill forests of the area exhibit a large variety of fauna. The elephant is the most commonly seen wild animal. Sambhur, porcupine, black monkey and bears are also found and small herds of bison can be seen occasionally.

Climate and Rainfall

According to K.K.Pillay the climate of the region is influenced by the two monsoon winds. The proximity of the sea and the dwindling height of Nanchilnad are very pleasant.¹² It is dry during the months of January and February. The sea breeze provides a soothing

effect to the coastal region during March, when radiation is more. The period of hot Sun prevails till June, when south-west monsoon sets in. This monsoon lasts till the month of August, thereafter the weather becomes dry. The north-east monsoon through the Western Ghats brings fairly high showers in October and December, which is retained till March. The south-west monsoon showers during June and July and it is locally called as *Saral*.¹³

Agricultural and Irrigation

Accordingly to K.K.Pillay, Agriculture is the predominant occupation in Nanchilnad. Paddy is the most important crop and it is cultivated in two seasons. Nanchilnad is the granary of modern Kanyakumari District. Plantains are also grown on a large scale. The Pandyan dam constructed by a Pandya king across the river Palayaru is one of the oldest irrigational sources in this region. Parakkai, Kottarm, Putheri, Thalakudi, Kadukkarai and Therur are the important paddy cultivating portions of this region.¹⁴

The Pandya kings took active interest in agriculture by affording irrigational facilities. Some of the inscriptions of the Pandya period enable us to get an idea of the agricultural and irrigational works undertaken by the Government. A few names of the *Kuzhams* (ponds) and *Vaykals* (canal) are known from the epigraphs. The rain water was stored in these ponds and lands were irrigated by the canals. Three inscriptions of Suchindrum temple (1125 A.D. 1224 A.D. and 1256 A.D.) mention about *Vetkaikulam*. A number of canals were dug to take water from Vetkaikulam for irrigation.

The important canals mentioned in the inscriptions are Indiravan Vaykal, Thiruvengkata Vaykal, Amarapuyanka Vaykal and Indiravira Vaykal. The inscriptions also mention about the directions and courses of the canals. For instance, the Suchindrum epigraph (1125 A.D.) mentions "Indiravan Vaykalukku Therku Munram Kannaru", which means the sluice laying the southern side of the Indiravan vaykal.¹⁵ It can also be suggested that the Canal was flowing in the north-south direction.

Social Groups in Nanchilnad

K.K. Pillay gives new interpretations to the position of Brahmins in the Nanjilnad region through epigraphic evidences. The epigraphs indicate the Siva Brahmanas and Srivaishnavas, two sub groups in the Brahmin community. The name Sivabrahmana is generally applied to the priest of the Siva temple and Srivaishnava is applied to the brahmana

priest in the Vishnu temple. The inscription from Cholapuram (1140 A.D.) refers to the food offerings made to the God by Sivabrahmanas of Kottar, who were the priests in the temple. Since they are referred to in plural, we may consider that they formed a group by themselves. The number of the Brahmanas constituting the group is not known. Another inscription from the same place (1217 A.D.) mentions a group of **Koyil Brahmanas** (Brahmanas attached to the temple).¹⁶ They could also be the temple priests, since they were entrusted with the maintenance of the perpetual lamp set up in the temple.

From the above two inscriptions, it may be inferred that Sivabrahmanas lived in Kottar and worked as priests in the Siva temples. From the study of the names, we can understand that various castes in Nanchilnad had their own titles suffixed to their names. The Brahmanas well versed in the Vedas had the title **Bhattar**. The stone masons and carpenter had the title **Kollam** and **Thanchchan** respectively and the mercantile community had their caste name **Chetti**.

Another community known from the inscription is **Vellalas**. The Puravaseri inscription (12th century A.D.) mentions as Udayadamodaran Kandankiraman Chola - Ankudivelar.¹⁷ The last part of the name was a title borne by cultivators. From the title Velar, we can understand that he belonged to Vellala community, even though there is no direct reference to him as a cultivator. According to K.K.Pillay there is no epigraphical evidence about the other communities.

Kottar, the metropolis of ancient Nanchilnad

Kottar, now a suburb of Nagercoil town was a commercial centre of fame during the past. The origin of the name of Kottar is mentioned in the Sthalapurana of Suchindrum.¹⁸ According to the Sthalapurana, God Indra commenced penance at Gnanaranya in order to secure redemption for his misbehaviour towards *Ahalya*, the devoted wife of sage *Gautama*. To get water in that place, Indra directed his elephant *Airavatha* to cause a river to flow from the Malaya Mountain.

The elephant proceeded to the mountain, pierced it by its tusk and caused a river to flow towards Gnanaranya. This episode led to the river being called Dantanaru of Kottaru (kodu means tusk). The town on the bank of the river also came to be known by the same name Kottaru.

The classical town Kottar was inhabited by men and women of noble descent. It was a perfect town and presented a beautiful appearance. There were many bazaars selling various goods. The main commodities of trade were pepper, ivory, teak, salt, rosewood and different varieties of fruits. The river *Palayaru* might have been used as an inland water way. Even now the bazaar of Kottar is famous for its trade and it is locally called ***Kulakadai***, which means *Pandakasalai* or emporium. The town had a number of lofty and palatial buildings beautified with multicoloured flags. Kottar served as a strategic base for the early rulers. From Pandikkovai, a sangam literature we learn that the town was once surrounded by a gigantic fort and it was captured by the Pandya King Arikesarimaravarman.

The town also contained abundance of merchandise, and was inhabited by a greater number of weavers, money changers, silversmiths, jugglers, comedians, dancing girls, conjurers and black artists. Kottar, one of the towns of ancient Tamil country, stands as an embodiment of different religions like Hinduism, Jainism, Saivism, Christianity and Islam and it continues to be a dynamic centre of trade.

According to K.K.Pillay Nanchilnad has a hoary past with a distinct culture of its own. Ay Kings were its early rulers. Pandyas, Cholas and the Nayaks also had their stints after which the rulers of Travancore came to establish their supremacy over it, in the first quarter of the 16th century A.D. It is the cradle of savants, notable among them being Atankottasan, Ilamperumanar, Muttukutti-swamigal, Kavimani Desika Vinayagam Pillai, K.N. Sivaraja Pillai, Satavadani Seikutambi and K.K. Pillay. Nanchilnad is the confluence of various religious faiths, which has one or more holy spots for the devout followers of all religions. The two religious sects of Hinduism viz., Saivism and Vaishnavism had very good impact on the society.

Another religion which has been referred vaguely to is Jainism.¹⁹ Saivism and Vaishnavism seem to have played an important role in this region. Sakthi worship was also a popular pattern of worship in this area. The contribution of Nanchilnad to the Saivite and Vaishnavite philosophies is substantial and significant. The temples at Suchindrum, Parakkai, Bhuthapandi, Nagercoil and the Kanyakumari Bhagavathi Amman temple are most important. For the Vaishnavities, the temple at Tiruvenparisaram (i.e. present Thiruppathisaram) is an important place of worship.

Christianity and Islam also had contributed substantially to the culture of Nanchilnad. The St. Xavier's church, the Catholic Church at Kanyakumari and the C.S.I. church, locally called *Kallukoil* at Nagercoil are venerable places of worship. The Dargah of Bavakkasim at Idalakudy near Kottar is one of the holy places for the Muslims.²⁰

Put it in nutshell, Dr.K.K.Pillay gave adequate importance to Nanchilnad, the most fertile region of erstwhile Travancore state and its location, social settings in his celebrated work entitled, "The Early History of Nanjilnad".

End Notes

1. K.K.Pillay, "**The Early History of Nanchilnad**", Madras, 1970, pp.10-15.
2. **Ibid.**, p.19.
3. **Ibid.**,
4. K.N.Sivaraja Pillai, **The Chronology of the early Tamils**, Madras, 1932, pp.5-10.
5. **Ibid.**, p.29.
6. **Ibid.**,
7. P. Ramachandran, '*History of Nanchilnad*', Unpublished M.Litt. dissertation, University of Kerala, 1970, pp.20-30.
8. **Ibid.**, p.59.
9. M. Gopalakrishnan, **Kanyakumari District Gazetteer**, Madras, 1995, pp.40-50.
10. **Silapathikaram**, Song No. 351.
11. P.Sheela,'*History of Thuckalay Town*', Unpublished M.Phil.dissertation, Alagappa University, Karaikudi, 2006, p.60-70.
12. **Ibid.**, p.89.
13. S. Sathasivam, '*Chera Nadum Chenthamizhum*' (Tamil), Nagercoil, 1970, pp.8-10.
14. **Ibid.**,
15. K.K.Pillay, **Suchindrum Temple**, pp.25-35.
16. **Ibid.**,
17. D. Velappan, **Nanchilnad** (Tamil), Eraviputhur, 1996, pp.35-40.
18. S.Padmanabhan, Kottar - A Metropolis, an Article published in **Indian Express**, English Daily, Madurai, 1975.
19. S.Padmanabhan, Aaiyvu Kalanjiyam, I.N. **Historical Research Journal**, Nagercoil, April 1996, pp.5-7.
20. **Ibid.**, p.9.