

Kottar Through The Ages

Dr.M. Gnana Oslin, Asst. Professor in History, D.G.G Arts College, Mayiladuthurai, Nagai

Dist.

ABSTRACT

A flourishing town, Kottar in Agasteeswaram taluk, is situated on the main road from Trivandrum to Kanyakumari. Kottar, an ancient city is a part of present Nagercoil Corporation in Kanyakumari district, but forms the oldest part. The city had a number of lofty and palatial buildings beautified with multi coloured flags. The place was surrounded by a vast expanse of paddy fields, flower gardens and coconut groves. This part of the town was a flourishing centre of commerce from a very early past. Ptolemy (150.A.D.) mentions 'Kottiara' as a metropolis with considerable trade, while Pliny calls the town 'Kottara', which is a nearer approximation to its correct present - day designation. The line, "Kottarana Mummudi Cholapuram" in the Nagaraja temple inscription reveals the fact that Kottar, the flourishing city of Nanchilnadu constituted an apple of discord among the Great Triad of Tamilnadu the Cheras, the Cholas and Pandyas. In Kottar there is a very busy market and the town also otherwise famous for its commercial enterprises. Kottar was called 'Rajendra Cholapuram' during the time of Rajendra Chola. From time immemorial, the region which now forms Kanyakumari district has been an important trading area. Ptolemy's geography and Pliny's Travel Account clearly indicate that it was one of the most important cities in the beginning of the Christian era. The Kottar Vinayagar Temple at Chettikulam occupies a unique place in the social map of Kottar. Known to the world as a commercial centre, Kottar wielded unflinching influence upon the different socio-economic sections of southern Tamilnadu. In 1544, St. Francis Xavier, the Catholic missionary, selected Kottar for his Evangelical work. The Cathedral of St. Xavier, containing a small chapel of our lady, where Xavier used to celebrate Holy Mass, is situated in the heart of Kottar. In the 18th century, after the advent of Ringletaube, the missionary of the London Missionary Society in this area, the piece took its present name Nagercoil. Kottar is also one of the places of sacred to Muslims. The Mohammadans live mostly in Aripputheru in Kottar. They live scattered in the densely populated area of Edalakudy. Kottar has made tremendous progress in areas like housing, sanitations, drainage, health-care, child-welfare, water supply, transportation etc.

Key Words

Kottar as a Trading Centre, Antiquity of Kottar, Hinduism in Kottar, Christianity and Islam, Present Condition of Kottar

Introduction

Kottar, an ancient city is a part of present Nagercoil Corporation in Kanyakumari district, but forms the oldest part. This part of the town was a flourishing centre of commerce

from a very early past. Ptolemy (150.A.D.) mentions 'Kottiar' as a metropolis with considerable trade, while Pliny calls the town 'Kottara', which is a nearer approximation to its correct present - day designation. Kanyakumari district is bounded by Tirunelveli district on the north and the east. The south-eastern boundary is the Gulf of Mannar. On the south and south-west, the boundaries are the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea.

On the west and north-west it is bounded by Kerala. The State Reorganisation Act, 1956 was passed and the Kanyakumari district was formed on November 1st, 1956, with the four taluks viz., Agasteeswaram, Thovalai, Kalkulam and Vilavancode and merged with Tamilnadu. Nagercoil is the headquarters of the Kanyakumari district. Nagercoil has developed considerably in recent years with a number of new and modern buildings, particularly in outskirts of the town. The various parts of Nagercoil are Kottar, Vadaseri, Vadiveeswaram, Krishnankoil, Ramanputhooor and Ozhuginasery.

Historical Background

A flourishing town, Kottar in Agasteeswaramtaluk, is situated on the main road from Trivandrum to Cape Comorin (Kanyakumari). In Kottar there is a very busy market and the town also otherwise famous for its commercial enterprises. There are numerous shops and streets and also a weaving colony. Country cloths of fine texture constituted the Pandya and Chola Supremacy in the medieval period of the south Indian History. Kottar was frequently the scene of conflicts between the rival powers. It was called Rajendra Cholapuram during the time of Rajendra Chola. There is in the heart of the town an ancient pagoda and a church founded by Francis Xavier. There are government institutions like Schools and the District Hospital here. Though it is large enough to be reckoned a separate town by itself, it is really

only a suburb of Nagercoil and the celebrated village of Vadiveeswaram is another suburb, not far away.

Kottar as a Trading Centre

Trade is a complex, worldwide business that has a direct bearing on the life of every citizen and country in general. So long as trade functions smoothly, it does mankind and very great services. It gives food, clothing other necessaries and service from producer to the consumer. It makes possible for industries to concentrate upon one or a few products. This specialization increases production and raises the standard of living throughout the world. Business in local communities is good example of the trade that is carried on daily, throughout the world.

Antiquity of Kottar

From time immemorial, the region which now forms Kanyakumari district has been an important trading area. A part of Nagercoil Corporation is a commercial centre of importance in days of yore. Ptolemy's geography and Pliny's Travel Account clearly indicate that it was one of the most important cities in the beginning of the Christian era. Dr. Caldwell, in his "Comparative Grammar of Dravidian Languages" states this is the name of a place in the country of Ays which is called 'Kottiara Metropolis with considerable trade' by Ptolemy and "Kottara" by Pliny. Undoubtedly, the town referred to is Kottar or as it is ordinarily spelt by the Europeans, Kottar the principal town in South Travancore and now, as in the time of the Greeks distinguished for its commerce."From the description of Kottargiven in "Thevaram" of Thiru Gnana Sambandar, one of the four Samyacharyas of the Saiva Sidhanta, it is learnt that Kottar was a great seat of art, culture, civilization and Pilgrimage. There were bazaars selling various goods. The main commodities of trade were

salt, pepper, ivory, teak, sandal, rose - wood and fruits. The river might have been used as Inland waterway and in all probability. Leepuram and Colachel might have been used as seaports. Even now the bazar of Kottar is famous and it is locally called "Pandakasalai". Sambandar aptly describes the city as "Thozhil Malgu Kottar" in his verses.

The city had a number of lofty and palatial buildings beautified with multicoloured flags. The place was surrounded by a vast expanse of paddy fields, flower gardens and coconut groves. A graphic picture of life in Kottar is given in "Thevaram". The description is supplemented by Fr. Bartolomeo, who said that "This city of considerable trade, is upwards of 2,000 years old; and is much frequented by merchants from the island of Ceylon, the provinces of Madura, Tanjore and the coast of Coramandal. A river which flows through the middle of it divides it into two parts. It contains abundance of merchandise; and is inhabited by a great number of weavers, money changers, silversmiths, jugglers, comedians, dancing girls, conjurers and black artists. Even today, Kottar is celebrated for its artificial silk and Vadasery, the northern part of Kottar is famous for its weaving industry. The place now contains people of all types of trade.

The rich plains of Nanchilnadu, the second granary of the south attracted many an outsider and Kottar which is said to have been the capital of Ay Kingdom, was subjected to numerous attacks. Edalakkudi the old name of which is "Edar Ay Kudi", a suburb of Kottar, suggests its association with the Ays. The line, "Kottarana Mummudi Cholapuram" in the Nagaraja temple inscription reveals the fact that Kottar, the flourishing city of Nanchilnadu constituted an apple of discord among the Great Triad of Tamilnadu the Cheras, the Cholas and Pandyas. In the words of Dr.K.K.Pillay "The fertility of Nanchilnadu no doubt, served as abait. Commencing from the days of the early Pandyas, Kottar the metropolis, became the

cockpit of the south". In the second half of the 7th century A.D., Kottar was attacked by the Pandya King of Madurai Arikesari Maravarman, the contemporary of the saivite saint, Thirugnana Sambandar. The victory of the Pandya King is found eulogized in Nakkirar's commentary on the "Iraiyana Agapporul". The verses also mention Kottar as a place encircled by a gigantic fort. The Chola influence on the political history of Nanchilnadu started in 910 A.D. during the period of Parantaka I, for his inscriptions are found at Suchindram and Agasteeswaram.

While his stay was only temporary, his successor, Rajaraja the great (985-1013 A.D.) organised a military campaign and entered the wealthy land of Nanchilnadu. In memory of his victory over Kottar the place was renamed as "Mummudi Cholanallur". The first epigraphical mention of Kottar is found in the record of Rajaraja I, in the 18th of his reign (1003 A.D.) engraved on a pillar in the Kommandaiamman temple at Vadasery and in the inscription of Sundarachola Pandya and Kulothunga I found in the Cholarajkoil. The "Kalin gathuparani" of Jayankondar describes the Kalinga was undertaken by the Chola King, Kulothunga I in 1095 A.D. and mentions the destruction of the rampart at Kottar with fire. Recognising its strategic importance, the Chola Kings took special steps to strengthen their defenses at Kottar.

The destroyed fort was reconstructed and used as their strong defensive structure in Nanchilnadu, Kottar which thus became a military outpost for the Cholas in the south. Consequently became a permanent military station. The military camp at Kottar is said to have been under the command of Velan Kumaran, a native of pudur, near Tirunandikkarai, in the district of Kanyakumari. It is interesting to note the phrase in an inscription, "Rajaditta Devar Perumpadai Nayakamalainattu Nandikkarai Pudur Velan Kumaran". The place named

Valankumaravillai, near Kottar also provides an additional clue to arrive at the above conclusion. In the 15 Century A.D., Kottar might have gone into the hands of the Kerala rulers of the Chera line. This is confirmed by the famous Alagiapandipuram Mudaliar palm leaf records of 1485 A.D. which mentions Kottar as "Kottarana Chola Keralapuram. From the hymns of Gnanasambandar it can be surmised that Jainism was a prominent religion in Kottar and the surrounding area during his days. There is also epigraphical evidence to show that there flourishing Jain settlements in Kottar, Kurandi, Thiruchchranathumalai (Chitharal) and Tirunandikarai which are all in the district of Kanyakumari.

The "Varagunan Cheivitha Thirumeni" in the inscription at Thiruchcharanam indicates that Jainism had royal support in the area during the 8th Century A.D. From the Jain vestiges and inscriptions found in Kalugumalai, Samanarmalai and Thiruchchranathumalai, in the district of Tirunelveli, Madurai and Kanyakumari respectively. It is learned that a large number of Jain monks, who were there hailed from the four places in Kanyakumari district. Scholars and their disciples from these centres of learning left historic images cut on the rocks in different centres of Jain culture. Putbananda Adigal, Uttananda Adigal, Vimala Chandra and Pathamoolathan Arangam Maran have prefixed the word Thirukottar.

Hinduism in Kottar

Vinayaga worship is very common and occupies a significant place in Kanyakumari district. Among the Vinayaga temples of the district, Chetty Nainar Desika Vinayagar temple of Kottar is the biggest one. The presiding deity of the temple is called as Maragatha Vinayagar. This name emerged because the temple was constructed and Vinayaga statue was sculptured in Maragatha stone. But now only the stone idol is seen in the sanctum and

sanctorum of new temple. The people living around this temple are called Chettiyars. They live here as a unique caste group with distinctive identity. They migrated from Kavirippumpattinam of the Chola country and settled later at Kottar. Their migration was attributed to the collapse of Kavirippumpattinam due to the submersion of the city under the sea waters. Also, there is another view that these people clashed with the Chola King and later left the city in order to settle down at various places of Tamilnadu. A group of such chettiyars who settled at Ramnad created the land called Chettinadu. They were also called as naharattars or city dwellers. From seventh century A.D. onwards, they came to accept Vinayaga as their chief deity. Subsequently they installed Vinayagar at different places and worshipped him. In such a way the great Vinayagar temple of Kottar was raised by their group of merchant community of Cholakingdom.

The Kottar Vinayagar Temple at Chettikulam occupies a unique place in the social map of Kottar. Known to the world as a commercial centre, Kottar wielded unflinching influence upon the different socio-economic sections of southern Tamilnadu. In the modern days, the pre-eminent position of Kottar is supported by the spiritual activities that are going on at Kottar. The Ezhava Vinayagar temple at Kottar was consecrated by a great socio-religious reformer of Kerala, Sree Naryana Guru. But the Vinayagar temple of the Chettiyars of Kottar is the richest temple in Nagercoil city and the wealth in landed property attached to this temple make it one of the richest temples of South India. Yet, the temple lands are divided among the Chettiyar community members of Kottar. It makes this community to enjoy inclusiveness and exclusiveness in the social life of Kottar. Their contribution to education is newsworthy in the modern days. The temple administrative body or temple Devaswom management is known for its leniency and yet lacking prudence to chalk out plans

andschemes of enduring values. No wonder, the Chettiyars and their Vinayagar temple of Kottar constitute the real cream of the town, Nagercoil.

Christianity and Islam

In 1544, St. Francis Xavier, the Catholic missionary, selected Kottar for his Evangelical work. The Cathedral of St. Xavier, containing a small chapel of our lady, where Xavier used to celebrate Holy Mass, is situated in the heart of Kottar. In the 18th century, after the advent of Ringletaube, the missionary of the London Missionary Society in this area, the piece took its present name Nagercoil. Nagercoil, the southernmost town of the Indian Peninsula owes much of its present position and importance to the efforts of the society which played an important role in many fields. Many 'firsts', such as the first English Schools, the first printing press, the first English newspaper and the first hospital in the erstwhile Travancore state and the first newspaper in the regional languages in India, have been the work of the missionaries.

Kottar is also one of the places of sacred to Muslims. The Mohammadans live mostly in Arripputheru in Kottar. They live scattered in the densely populated area of Edalakudy. The city is still a centre of trade and industry. The floral garlands and decorative pieces made here adorn all the grandest wedding halls. Weaving is one of the most notable industries. India has long been known as the home of the most excellent weaving and Travancore had her share in this reputation most probably, however, the weavers were brought into Travancore from the Pandya country. Having come to teach, they remained to live and work. The Saliyas, a weaver caste, live primarily around Kottar and Eraniel. They trace their original home to Gujarat from which place they fled during the Muslim invasions. They settled in Tanjore, Madura and Tirunelvely, finally coming to south Travancore. The

heritage established has continued, and now the weavers around Eraniel and Colachel produce thousands of yards of cloth annually. Time was when they spun their own yarn from locally raised cotton. The advent of spinning machinery practically annihilated this part of the industry. The handloom weaving was all done with will-made yarn. The vogue for spinning has revived this industry to a certain extent, so that a part of the yardage now produced is pure Khadi. Weaving views with the palmyra cultivation is popularity in this part of the country. Beginning of the 20th Century, Kottar-Market is one of the greatest trading centres in South India. Harsely in his Memoir of Travancore" States streets one irregular conditioned which are length from North to south. There are General building and Tobacco Pandagasalai vegetable, fish and other goods are there. Travancore king and his family used to purchase the Gold, silver and others in Kottar Market. Also Kottar was renowned for the Coinshops.

Till now there is a street by the name "Kasukadai Street". People who go on a pilgrimage to Kasi would purchase 'Hundy' from Kottar Vairavan Pandaram and at Kasi they would exchange it for money. This incident shows the name and fame of these 'hundials' throughout the country, which acted as a currency. The trades men of Kottar specifically the tobacco tradesmen have contributed about one percentage of their total income for the daily pooja purposes in Tiruchendur temple. The offerings will be given in a silver tray, so that group was called as "Vellithambalakattalai Mahamai". Also the tradesmen at Kottar have formed an union and had followed that. During the year 1934, "The south Travancore Trade Association" was formed. A representative of this association had been appointed as the 'Representative of Trade and commerce' for that constituency. Travancore Kings and his family purchase the Gold and Silver in Kottar market.

Present Condition of Kottar

After the union of Kanyakumari district with Tamilnadu in the year 1956 many changes took place in Kottar market. Due to this the market had to face serious consequences. The paddy which was brought from northern states was considered to be trade from one state to another (Previously it was considered as an inland trade). There were many restrictions for that and taxes were levied. Due to that emerged the "Black market". There was no tax levied on food products by the Travancore Kingdom, the Tamilnadu Govt. imposed sales tax. Opposing the marketers conducted many strikes, processions, filing cases in the court etc. During the year 1967 'Regulating Market' was started in Kanyakumari district. The first sales centre started at Eathamozhi and Vadasery sales centre come to the limit of Kottar market. During the year 1977 a new Railway line was erected to the south of Kottar to Tirunelveli and Trivandrum to the north. This linked Kottar market with other national centres of trade.

Due to the importance of Kottar market the centre or the main station for Nagercoil Railway station was constructed very near the market. It is a noteworthy or significant thing in the history of Kottar market. Once upon a time southern India and Srilanka had been dependent on Kottar market. But in due course of time the market had to face many ups and downs. Even the area of the place called Kottar has shriveled and places such as Nagercoil and Vadasery which had once been a part of Kottar emerged into an independent and developed area. At present in the reduced area of Kottar, there are no cloth shops or jewel shops. There is no trace of tobacco trade. Copper and bronze vessel shops exist at present. The place called "Koolakadai" renowned for its vegetable market is available. The name of an agricultural sale zone has not vanished. Not only the paddy from Nanchilnadu is brought but

also other agricultural products such as onion, chilly, palm-jaggery etc are brought from Tirunelveli and sold here at Kottar market. But this place once called as "Kambolam" is not that much active as before. The reason for this drawback is due to the modernization in transport and communication facilities. During the olden days the only mode of transport was bullock carts.

On the way from Kottar to Eathamozhi and Kottar to Parvathipuram there were many Vehicle stands (for bullock carts). Also Ozhuginasery was once a centre for postal vehicles. 'Vadasery' it got its name since it is to the 'Vada' ie northern side of Kottar. This place was fit for the weavers to do their weaving work. Next to bullock carts there came vehicles run by engines. It was operated from Nagercoil the Tower, but due to heavy traffic it was shifted to Meenakshipuram. Naturally there people became the customers of the shops located nearby the bus stands. Due to this many shops such as cloth shops, jewellery shops, and other household item shops began to emerge. The growth of the transports has brought destruction to Kottar Agricultural sales market. Kottar market is now a part of a market of a big span.

Conclusion

Studies in local history help to the reconstruction of a country's or a region's heritage in a big way. In a heterogeneous society like India, each area has a distinct culture of its own depending on climate, ecological and ethnological factors. From time immemorial Kottar was the place in which history marked its foot-prints under the rule of Ays, Pandyas, Cholas and so on. People of several castes like Brahmins, Vellalas, Nadars, Chettiyars, Ezhavas, Fishermen, Parayas, Chakkiliyas, Yadavas, Muslims, Christians, Naidu etc. are found in Kottar. Unlike the past at present gradually the social condition of the people had

greatly changed. As a result the different caste people lived in harmony, and preserving social integrity. Kottar has made tremendous progress in areas like housing, sanitations, drainage, health-care, child-welfare, water supply, transportation etc.

REFERENCE

1. Chinthamani, *Kanyakumari Mavatta Malar* (Tamil), Nagercoil, 1985.
2. Gopalakrishnan, *Kanyakumari District Gazeteers*, Govt. of Tamilnadu, Madras, 1995.
3. Hatch E.H., *Travancore - A Guide Book for the visitor*, Oxford University Press, London, 1933.
4. Johnson. J., *Life History of St. Xavier*, Chennai, 1978.
5. Kusuman, K.K., *English Trade in Travancore Historical Society*, Trivandrum, 1977.
6. Lawrence. V., *History of the Catholic Church in Kanyakumari District*, Nagercoil, 2002.
7. Neelakandan. T., *Kottar Chettiyyar Varalarum Valviyalum* (Tamil), Nagercoil, 1989.
8. NilakantaSastriK. A., *Foreign Notices on South India*, University of Madras, Madras, 1966.
9. Perumal A.K., *Kanyakumari Mavatta Varalaru* (Tamil), Nagercoil, 1991.
10. PadmanabhaIyer. A., *Modern Travancore*, Trivandrum, 1941.
11. Pillai.K.K., *The Early History of Nanchil Nadu*, Madras, 1953.
12. Padmanabhan. S., *The Forgotten History of the Land's End*, Nagercoil, 1972.
13. Pazhaniappan. T., *NagercoilVaralaru* (Tamil), Nagercoil, 1988.
14. Ramaswamy S., *Kanyakumari District Directory*, Nagercoil, 1957.
15. Sivalinganathan. P., *Kumari Mavatta Thakaval Kalanjiyam* (Tamil), Nagercoil, 1961.
16. Velapan. D., *Nanchilnadu* (Tamil), Nagercoil, 2002.
17. Velazhagan. T., *Nagercoil Nagar Varalaru* (Tamil), Nagercoil, 1968.