

The old Travancore army -A historical perspective

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1. Introduction

Travancore occupies a prominent place in the Indian States. This state has in the past, come in intimate contact with every type of ancient civilization, the Chaldaean, the Egyptian, the Greek, the Roman and the Chinese. But it preserved its cultural tradition intact, while, profiting in certain respects by association with outside. The paramount duty of the Government in the matter of imparting Public Instruction was recognised. They developed well disciplined Army.

The early Cheras were great conquerors, Imayavarmpan Netuncheralatan (1st century A.D.) scored a victory over the Kadambas and this victory is compared by a poet of the time to that of the war - God Subrahmanya over Surapadma. He is also said to have defeated the Yavanas (Greek). His brother and successor Palyanichelkezhukuttuvan was also a powerful warrior, who is described in the Tamil Classic, Patittupattu, as 'the ever - victorious lord of vast armies and the protective armour of fierce - eyed warriors'. The greatest monarch of that dynasty was Chenkuttuvan (2nd century A.D.) who not only gained a decisive naval victory over his enemies, but also extended his conquests as far as the Himalayas. Perumcherallurmapurai defeated his enemies in the battle of Takatur. It is needless to quote further illustrations.

The later Cheras were equally powerful rulers. One of them, Sthanu Ravi (A.D. 870 - 900) was a friend of Aditya I, of the Vijayalaya line of the Chola kings and it was both these kings together that crushed the power of the Pallavas of Conjivaram. Goda Ravi Varma (A.D. 912 - 942) successfully resisted the Ganga invasion of Kerala through Palghat.

The Travancore rulers appear to have maintained an army and a navy from the earliest times known to history, Vizhinjam, in the Neyyattinkara Taluk, was their southern emporium where they maintained a fleet. In 791 A.D. a battle was fought at Karaikkottai, near Nagercoil, in which the ruler of Venad defeated the Pandya ruler and killed Ranakirti, one of his generals. All the country, from Cape Comorin to Tiruvalla belonged to them and they could not have protected it without an efficient army. Rajaditya, the son of Parantaka I, (907 - 955 A.D.) the great Chola emperor, had a large number of Malayali soldiers in his array and one of his distinguished generals, Vellankumaran, was a native of Puttur on the banks of the Tirunantikkairiver in the Kalkulam Taluk. In the Tiruvalangadu plates of the Chola emperor, RajendrasChola I (A.D. 1014 to 1044), it is stated that Keralesvara, whom from the context I take to be the kind of Travancore, had a powerful army. KulottungaChola I (1020 to 1120 A.D.) also refers to the great army of Travancore, in one of his inscriptions. Kulottunga had to maintain a strong military force known as Nilappatai in

Nanchanad against the possible onslaughts of the Travancore army.

The military achievements of Vira Ravi Varma Chakkravati of the Quilon (Jayasimhanat) branch of the Travancore royal family are too well known to call for recapitulation in this connection. He was born in 1266 A.D. and died about 1315. He conquered the whole of Kerala in his thirty - three year of age and after conquering the Pandyas, the Cholas and the Kakatiyas, bore the title of Trikshatrachudamani and crowned himself as the emperor of South India in Conjivaram in his forty sixth year. There is inscriptional evidence to show that he extended his conquests as far as Poonamale in Madras. He is generally known to history and literature by his surname Samgramadhira, which means 'the brave in war'. Large portions of the territory conquered by him in the Tirunelveli District remained with his successors for several centuries. Aditya Varma Sarvanganatha (A.D. 1375) was also a powerful warrior, In his Vatasserri inscription it is stated that he knew to wield all the thirty six weapons of war and that he defeated several kings in battle.

During the time of Rama Varma, the predecessor of MartandaVarma, the power of Travancore had considerably dwindled on account of internal dissensions and it became therefore necessary for him in 1726 to secure a force of 1000 cavalry and 2000 Carnatic sepoy to restore order in the state. As soon as Vira MartandaVarma ascended the throne, this force was disbanded, but it again became essential for him to bring another force soon after. It is, however, seen that the Maharaja had his own Nayar and Marava troops, that an attack planned against the temple of Sri Padmanabha by the contingent brought by Kunchutampis from Trichinapoly was unsuccessful and that the Maharaja himself was able to collect an adequate force composed of horse and feet from Quilon to wrest the fort of Kalkulam from his enemies. It was this indigenous army of Travancore under Ramayyan Dalava that conquered Ilayitattu Svarupam (Kottarakkara) and defeated the Rajas of Quilon and Kayamkulam, though in the war with Kayamkulam a regiment of Maravas from Tinnevely under Ponnand Pandya Tevar also co-operated. It was the same army that defeated the Dutch at Colachel, where also the military genius of Ramayyan, not to speak of that of the Maharaja, was in conspicuous evidence.

At the battle of Colachel Captain Eustachius D' Lanney of Flemish origin, was taken prisoner. Another soldier, sergeant Duyvenschot, also became employed under Travancore, Both of them according to Moens, the Dutch Governor of Cochin, 'not only understood their military duties and were well educated men, but had besides a fairly good knowledge of fortification and the art of war, having served in Europe and

gained some experience. In the wars against the Dutch at Quilon and Kilimanur, Travancore, according to the Dutch accounts of 1742, is said to have lost 6000 to 9000 men, which shows that it must have had an extensive army at that time. D' Lanney became attached to the Travancore army in 1740 and in due course became its commander - in - chief, serving Maharajas MartandaVarma and Rama Varma with remarkable loyalty and distinction till his death at 62 years of age in 1772. The infantry reorganized by D'Lanney, according to Robert Orme, the historian, consisted of 1,00,000Nayars and "20,000 other feet of various arms". It was with this army that the possessions of Tinnevely beyond the ghats were ruled for sometime until they had to be given up to the Nawab of Arcot under pressure from the English East India Company, further conquests in North Travancore and Cochin were effected and the Zamorin kept at bay.

In the war against Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan of Mysore, Travancore regiments of cavalry and infantry were placed at the disposal of the divisional commanders of the East India Company at Calicut, Palghat and Tinnevely and they were universally accladed to have behaved themselves remarkably well. The contingent sent to Tinnevely had to remain there for a period of two years.

A portion of the army of Travancore was known as the Carnatic Brigade. When this brigade was organised and how it came to bear that appellation are shrouded in mystery. It is however possible that this Brigade derives that name, because one of the objects with which it was constituted was to assist the Nawab of Carnatic in times of trouble in Madura and Tinnevely. If that is so, this Brigade could have come into existence only in 1767 at the earliest. Towards the close of the reign of Maharaja Rama Varma, it was stationed at Alleppey and Col. Daly was its Commander from 1789 to 1809. It was this force led by Raja KesavaDas that fought on the side of the company against Tippu Sultan at Palghat, Coimbatore and Seringapatnam. Clause 7 of the treaty of 1795 required that Travancore should furnish such aid, to such extent and in such numbers as may be in his power from his regular infantry and cavalry, exclusive of the native Nayars of the country the expenditure on that account being met by the company.

The story of the tribute that was compelled to be paid by Travancore to the British formerly is very interesting. In 1788, the Maharaja applied to Sir Archibald Campbell, Governor of Fort St. George, for a loan of 4 officers and 12 sergeants to train six battalions and other troops detailed by him for encountering the army of Tippu in the event of an invasion of Travancore by him. The Governor, while rejecting that request, suggested that one, two or even three battalions of the company's troops might be employed with advantage in securing Travancore against any sudden attack from Tippu. The Maharaja had to accept this suggestion because of the contingency of the situation and agreed to receive the battalions. The monthly expenditure of one battalion amounted to a little more than 1750 star pagodas and the Maharaja agreed to pay this cost either in cash or in pepper. The two battalions were not to be employed outside Travancore should any additional force be found necessary to strengthen the frontier, it was to be maintained entirely at the cost of the

company. In the treaty of 1795, the Maharaja was asked to pay annually 'both in peace and war, a sum equivalent to the expense of three of the Honourable Company's battalions of sepoy, together with a company of European artillery and two companies of lascars'. The subsidiary force was stationed at Quilon. Its first Commander was Captain Knox. It arrived in April 1789, but was in no way useful to Travancore in the war with Tippu in December, that year. The expenses of the subsidiary force became a permanent feature in the treaty of 1795.

The Travancore army was used to be paid partly in cash and partly in kind. VeluTampiDalava, on the ground of financial stringency, reduced several of its emoluments in 1804, with the result that there was a general insurrection' VeluTampi then disbanded all but 8000 men. This was one of the reasons which led to the treaty of 1805 under which Travancore agreed, under coercion, to pay a sum equivalent to the expenses of four battalions of native infantry, in addition to the amount payable under the treaty of 1795. Apart of the subsidy due under the treaty of 1795. Apart of the subsidy due under the treaty of 1795, used to be paid in pepper, but after 1805 the price of pepper fell and the company pressed Travancore for the payment of the entire subsidy in cash. Already groaning under a heavy war debt, Travancore could not possibly comply with this demand and VeluTampi had no alternative but to make a refusal. This was the main cause of the enmity between him and Col. Macaulay which eventually led to the revolt of VeluTampi towards the close of 1808.

As a measure of retrenchment, Macaulay had suggested to VeluTampi the dismissal of the Carnatic Brigade, but VeluTampi, who suspected the bonafides of that suggestion would not accept it. Lieut. Col. Chalmers was at that time in command of the subsidiary force composed of three battalions of the Madras army, which was stationed at Quilon. The contest between the forces of Chalmers and VeluTampi commenced on the 28th December, 1808. In the middle of January 1809, a sufficiently large contingent was assembled by the company and sent under the command of Lieut. Col. Sentleger along the Aramboly lines, thus creating a diversion in favour of Chalmers. Sentleger took Aramboly on the 10th January, Nagercoil and Kottar on the 17th and Udayagiri and Padmanabhapuram on the 19th. Lieut. Col. Welsh, who was one of the officers employed under Sentleger in that campaign, states that Aramboly was defended by ten thousand men and fifty pieces of cannon. Nagercoil was defended by only six hundred men. Welsh observes 'Although generally speaking, the enemy had proved far below our expectations, yet there are some exceptions. On the 10th a Native Officer in the lines, after being fired at by a soldier of the 69th, cut him down and was killed by another soldier; a few others also stood on both days and refusing to surrender, were put to death on the spot. These instances deserve to be recorded, because they were rare, for, taking them all in all, I never beheld a more dastardly crew nor did they deserve the name of soldiers, although nearly clothed in military uniforms, furnished with capital arms and in a country, every inch of which might have been defended'. At the Padmanabhapuram Palace, the victorious army found 'many valuable swords, dirks, pistols, guns, rich muslins, kinchebe etc., Several of the swords proved to be gold hilted and the

blades were of the first water'. The British army 'captured sixty elephants and about fifty thousand stand of arms with several hundred gund; but the greatest curiosities were a gun and mortar, both of exquisite workmanship. Mounted on the parade in Udayagiri and cast in the place by some European artist. They were made of brass, the gun sixteen feet long and bored as a twenty - two pounder was so extremely massive, that twelve hundred men assisted by sixteen elephants, could not move it even for a few yards".

In the meantime, the main army of VeluTampi, 30,000 strong, with 18 guns, was defeated in the battle of Quilon on the 10th January by Lieut, Col. Picton and Captain Newall. On the 15th February, VeluTampi who had encamped at Kilikollur near Quilon with an army of 5000 men, suffered another crushing defeat. Peace was concluded between Travancore and the British Government on the 2nd March, 1809. It may be pointed out in this connection that the bulk of VeluTampi's army

both in Quilon and Aramboly were raw recruits, the force actually in service being only 8000 strong after the reform of 1804 and it was therefore that they conveniently came in for the description of being a dastardly crew at the hands of Welsh.

2. Conclusion

When UmminiTampi became Dewan on the 15th March, 1809, one of the first acts he was obliged to perform was the dismissal of the state army, together with the Carnatic Brigade, excluding 700 of the first Nayar battalion, who were thence forward to be employed only for ceremonial purposes. The defence of the state was wholly entrusted to the subsidiary force stationed at Quilon a part of which was posted at Trivandrum. Thus the colonial rulers ended the career of the old Travancore army, which on numerous occasions covered itself with glory and reflected credit on the state.

References

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