



VELU THAMPI DALAWA AND HIS INVALUABLE CONTRIBUTIONS TO TRAVANCORE HISTORY: A RE- READING SHAMBU R

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ABSTRACT

The role of Dalawas in the making of Kerala history and especially that of Travancore history is a relevant study in itself. Mostly, these ministerial position or those who adorned this position were subservient towards their rulers having complete allegiance and faith in the ruling authority. Velu Thampi Dalawa however was an insult to this particular practice as he was a strong willed man with his own personal decisions and administrative skills. Travancore at that point of time was under resident rule of British with the ruler of Travancore being made a puppet in the hands of an alien rule. Velu Thampi held his own visions for state development and its subsequent administration. He understood that the British were exploiting Travancore completely in the name of Resident rule. He raised his voice against them assimilated people through well known activities such as kundara proclamation allied with his contemporaries such as palieth Achan etc. and initiated fight against alien domination and exploitation. Even though the struggle ended up in favour of British his patriotic activities and fight against British especially from south Indian division still remains as an unforgettable chapter in the history of Travancore and Kerala.

Keyword: Travancore, Dalawas, Velu Thampi, Quilon

INTRODUCTION

The history of Travancore began with Anizham Thirunal Marthanda Varma who inherited the kingdom of Venad and expanded it into Travancore during his reign from 1729 to 1758. The position of *Dalawas* were as significant as those of the kings of Travancore. Marthanda Varma, one of the greatest rulers among the Travancore Royal family also patronised *Dalawas*. During his ruling period, which however was further practiced by Dharma Raja who came into power just after his reign, where eight *Dalawas* were speculated to have worked under him. This however continued during the reign of Avittom Thirunal Balarama Varma Kulasekhara Perumal as well, where his court was adorned with the presence of three *Dalawas* altogether. Velu Thampi was considered as the second and most powerful among them. His time is considered as a glorious chapter as far as the struggle for freedom from the British yoke is considered. He is labelled as one of the earliest to rebel against the British East India Company's exploitative rule in South India.

EARLY LIFE

Velayudhan Thampi, popularly known as Velu Thampi was born on 6th may 1765 in an aristocratic nair family as the son of Sri.Kunjumayitti Pillai and his wife Valliyammai Pillai in the village of Thalakkulam in Kalkulam Taluk situated around 10 miles from the town of Nagarcoil in the present day Indian state of Tamil Nadu¹. His full name was “*Idaprabhu Kulottunga Kathirkulathu Mulappada Arasarana Irayanda Talakulathu Valiya Veetil Thampi Chempakaraman Velayudhan*“. His

family were entitled with the high title of “Chempakaraman” for their grand service rendered to the state by Maharajah Marthanda Varma. He obtained his early education in Tamil, Malayalam, Sanskrit and Hindustani².

DISTINCTIVE ACTIVITIES OF VELU THAMPI AS A DALAWA

He stood distinct among others as a straight forward person and he strongly protested against any anti-social activities. He was appointed as the Tahasildar of Mavelikkarai during the initial years of his reign under Maharajah Balarama Varma. In 1799 he was appointed as the Mulakumdeseela Sarvadhikariakkar (commercial minister) in Travancore³. Later in 1801 he was appointed as the *Dalawa* in Travancore. After Raja Kesavadas's death, Odiyeri Jayanthan Sankaran Namboothiri became the *Dalawa*. In the next three years after the death of Raja Kesavadas the country faced serious internal problems and corruption by the Namboothiri Dalawa. The state Treasury soon became empty and decided to collect extra taxes from the people. The people hesitated and gathered all around Travancore and surrounded the Palace. They strongly demanded the dismissal and banishment of the Namboothiri Dalawa and his two ministers. The Maharajah approved the request of his people and punished them and subsequently VeluThampi became the *Dalawa* of Travancore. His elevation to this exalted post was a clear recognition of his abilities as an administrator. He was able like Ramayyan Dalawa, Varkala Subbayyan Iyyer and Raja Kesavadas. Velu Thampi Dalawa took a series of steps to promote the public interest and enhance the prestige of the state Government. Strict honesty was enforced among public servants and order prevailed throughout the Kingdom⁴. Even though he was an able statesman, he was rebellious in nature. He resorted to harsh punishments with a clear view to improve the deplorable social situation that persisted in Travancore at that point of time. He adopted some rude punishment methods such as flogging, cutting off of ears and nose and nailing people to trees etc. Nevertheless, his harsh measures produced good results and peace was restored within a year of his accession to Dalawaship⁵.

Veluthampi was also very keen to strengthen the friendship that existed between the company and the State. He was an admirer of Diwan Raja Kesavadas, so that the safest plan was to follow the system of government adopted by the noble Statesman⁶. He held a good relationship with the British Resident Colin Macaulay. He consulted Resident on all important State affairs and sought their advice. From the time when he became the Prime Minister, he maintained a straight forward approach in all economic matters⁷. However the enemies of the *Dalawa* and the Resident tried to influence the Maharajah by pointing out that the Resident was unnecessarily interfering in the internal affairs of the State with a view of seizing power. Ever since the revision of 1795 treaty with the British, Travancore have had to pay a large amount as subsidy to the English. In order to find additional fund for this the *Dalawa* thought of abolishing the war time allowances given to the Nair troops of Travancore. He thought that the abolition of subsidy would be less painful than the prospect of suffering further bondage under the English if the arrears of tribute remained unpaid. However, what the *Dalawa* proposed his enemies was disposed immediately. The Nair soldiers began to mutiny and broke the fort at Udayagiri and Mavelikkarai, they then marched towards the capital with around 10000 soldiers demanding the dismissal

of the obnoxious minister and his associates and appointment of a minister nominated by the military⁸. However the mutiny was suppressed using British forces and punished all leaders responsible for the mutiny.

STRAINING RELATION WITH THE BRITISH

Velu Thampi maintained a good relationship with Colin Macaulay and vice versa. Colin Macaulay was confident in *Dalawa's* abilities and he thought he will be an asset to the British in promoting their interests and he expressed it in his letters to the Madras Government. In their first meeting itself Macaulay discussed about the revision of the treaty of 1795 with the *Dalawa*. However the Maharajah decided to adhere to the 1795 treaty and sent a letter to the Madras Government saying so. It seems that Macaulay's first attempts to secure a revision of 1795 treaty had failed. However he continued to think that the *Dalawa* was his man. The Maharajah however remained firm on his decision when he heard the provision of adding four lakh to the existing subsidy of six lakhs. However Colin Macaulay assembled the British troops in Tirunelveli and marched into the eastern borders⁹. The pressure and threats exerted by the Resident and the advice of the *Dalawa* forced the Maharajah to sign the new treaty on 12th January 1805.

SIGNIFICANT AGITATIONS LED BY VELU THAMPI AGAINST ALIEN RULE

The treaty of 1805 made Travancore to face some internal problems and financial crisis and this made the State indebted to the British. In 1807 Colin Macaulay demanded a large amount of money for suppressing the Nair Mutiny and in some occasions he tried to enter the internal affairs of the state because the Maharajah wanted the Madras Government to recall the Resident. Meanwhile the search for money led to recoup the arrears of subsidy. Velu Thampi immediately ordered the attachment of land of Mathu Tharakan who owned a large amount of money to the Travancore Government by ways of taxes¹⁰. Mathu Tharakan had complained to the Resident who without reason or justice asked the *Dalawa* to cancel the orders. However, *Dalawa* paid no attention to the Resident. And this increased the tension between the *Dalawa* and the Resident. Similarly Travancore affair, those related with the neighbouring Kingdom of Cochin also led to a chaotic situation and distaste against the Resident. The Rajah of Cochin had retired to a small village near Alwaye while the Kingdom was actually run by his powerful minister and relative namely Palieth Achan Govindan Menon. Palieth Achan wanted the assassination of a powerful and a trusted aid of the Rajah, a certain Nadavarambathu Kunju Krishna Menon who was protected by the Resident. This increased the hostility between the Palieth Achan and the Resident who started interfering in the internal affairs of Cochin as well, incurring serious displeasure from PaliethAchan. Both Velu Thampi and Palieth Achan wanted the assassination of the British Resident and end their supremacy. They both made preparations, as a matter of fact Velu Thampi wrote to the Zamorin and the French for assistance but they didn't respond in a positive manner. However they attacked the Residency at Bolghaty in the night of 28th December 1808. The Nair soldiers surprised the British and defeated them. Meanwhile, the Resident and Kunju Krishna Menon escaped to Quilon in a ship¹¹. Velu Thampi ordered his Nair troops to attack them in Quilon. As the result of this

attack on the Resident, he dispatched order to the officers commanding the British army at Tirunelveli, Malabar, Ceylon and Srirangapatnam for the immediate dispatch of sizeable contingents to Travancore¹². The Nair force attacked the subsidiary forces at Quilon. In spite of great numbers, the Nair troops were defeated by the British forces in the historical night 20th December 1808. Velu Thampi on understanding this entered Quilon through Kottarakkara and made his head quarters at Kundara near Quilon.

FAMOUS KUNDARA PROCLAMATION OF 1809 (KANDARA VILAMBARAM)

By the time reinforcement to the British arrived, their Government decided to adhere by the provisions of the revised treaty of 1805 and the Madras Governor's instruction to the Maharajah to keep themselves out from all these problems. Meanwhile Velu Thampi described the people about British imperialism and urged them to fight for their motherland. This act is known as the famous Kundara proclamation and it happened on 11th January 1809 (1st Makaram 984 M.E). The Kundara proclamation gave a boost to the moral of the people of Travancore. He called for the abolition of paying taxes to the British. The whole country rose as one against the British. As a result complete carnage of foreigners took place in Travancore. This proclamation was one of the significant milestone events against British colonialization in South India.

LAST DAYS OF VELU THAMPI AS DALAWA IN TRAVANCORE

Subsequently after Kundara proclamation, on 15th January 1809 Velu Thampi attacked the subsidiary force at Quilon¹³. They failed the attack and the battle ended without desired results. On returning to Kundara, Velu Thampi wrote to the Zamorin of Calicut and Palieth Achan to strengthen the struggle against the British. But the letter to Zamorin ended up in the hands of British Collector in Malabar Thomas Warden. By this time the British forces arrived on western, northern and eastern boundaries of the state. Palieth Achan defended the first wave of British soldiers in the north but defeated later. On the southern front of Travancore the attack was under the command of Honourable Col. S. Leger. On 19th February they took control of the forts of Udayagiri and Padmanabhapuram and marched towards Trivandrum. In these incidents Velu Thampi met the Maharaja on 8th March 1809 and requested the Maharajah to remove him from office from the next day onwards¹⁴. However the Resident appointed a new *Dalawa*, Oommini Thampi and set up a search party for catching Velu Thampi. They apprehended Kochu Sankara Pillai , the secretary of Velu Thampi and some of his friends and servants torturing them brutally but they couldn't catch Velu Thampi. Since, several attempts, on 27th March 1809 they found out the hiding place of Dalawa in Mannady .They surrounded the place and asked Velu Thampi to surrender. However Velu Thampi refused to surrender and cut his throat with the aid of his brother inside the Mannady temple and died there. The British force only got his body. Velu Thampi's brother surrendered and was taken to Quilon and was executed there. Colin Macaulay and Col. Leger were so barbarous and they ill treated the body of *Dalawa*. The body was taken to Trivandrum and "exposed on a gibbet" at Kannamalay for public execration¹⁵ and later buried at Ulloor. Velu Thampi's house was destroyed, his property taken with his relatives being deported to Maldives. Kunjuvira Thampi, the younger brother of the *Dalawa*

and some of the other members including men, women and children escaped to other countries¹⁶. The supporters of the revolt were punished and the ones who helped the British were well rewarded and some were even promoted in their administrative ranks. Following the death of Velu Thampi, Palieth Achan was captured by the British and was deported to Madras and kept as a prisoner for 25 years and later died in Banaras.

CONCLUSION

The revolt of Velu Thampi started a new chapter for the people of Travancore and India against the British Empire. It was labelled as one of the important revolts in South India against the colonial domination of British East India Company. It was one of the earliest revolts waged against the British Imperial Authority. In spite of the failures the revolt has an important role because of this Travancore became popular among Indian Princely states. Velu Thampi wanted to flush away the British colonialization from Travancore and the result of the revolt came out to be as a different one. Ever since the onslaught of the revolt the British clawed upon Travancore restricting the freedom of the state in many areas. However the struggles of Velu Thampi against British rule is written in golden letters in the pages of history.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ M.V. Abraham, *A Concise History of Travancore*, Trivandrum, 1942, p.2.
 - ² B. Sobhanan, *Velu Thampi and the British*, Trivandrum, 1978, p.9.
 - ³ P. Shungoony Menon, *A History of Travancore*, Madras, 1978, p.296.
 - ⁴ V. Nagam Aiya, *Travancore State Manual*, vol.I, p.421.
 - ⁵ *Ibid.*, p.424.
 - ⁶ P. Shungoony Menon, *op. cit.*, p.307.
 - ⁷ *Ibid.*, p.305.
 - ⁸ *Ibid.*, p.308.
 - ⁹ N. Balakrishnan Nair, *Swarejyabhimani*(mal.), Trivandrum, 1955, p.208.
 - ¹⁰ A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, Trivandrum, 1967, p.263.
 - ¹¹ V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.*, vol.II, p.433.
 - ¹² B. Sobhanan, *op. cit.*, p.82.
 - ¹³ Government of Travancore, *Kundara Proclamation*, Koondara, 1st Magaram 984, (1709)A.D.
 - ¹⁴ N. Balakrishnan Nair, *op. cit.*, p.332.
 - ¹⁵ P. Shungoony Menon, *op. cit.*, p.349.
 - ¹⁶ T.K. Velu Pillai, *Velu Thampi Dalawa*, Trivandrum, 1949, p.111.