

## THE VANNIYAR IN MEDIEVAL SOUTH INDIA

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The Vanniyar, who form an important segment of the Tamil population in South India, are concentrated in the districts of Tanjore, Tirchinopoly, North Arcot, South Arcot and Chingleput where they form one of the three major divisions of the Hindu population.<sup>1</sup> Their numbers in Coimbatore, Salem and Pudukottai are considerable but in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu their distribution is relatively thin.

The Vanniyar, who were of diverse social origins, developed as a community of professional warriors during the medieval period when they were fully integrated with the Hindu social organization of the Tamil country. The expression Vanniyar was applied in the literary and epigraphic texts to designate not only the members of a particular caste or community but also the rank of a feudatory prince and the leader of an army.<sup>2</sup>

The Vanniyar caste consists of many sub-divisions such as the Agni, Pataiyācci, Paḷḷi, Kāvuntan and Kūṭaikaṭṭi.<sup>3</sup> Most of them being agricultural and manual labourers they have remained economically and socially backward until recent times. But with the impact of modernization they began to respond quickly to social and economic changes in their environment. A strong community consciousness and an increasing awareness of their strength as symbolised by the formation of a political party of their own - the Toilers party - are characteristic trends in their contemporary development.

### Traditional accounts of the origins of the Vanniyar

The traditions of the origins and development of the Vanniyar are recorded in three medieval Tamil texts, the Cilai elupathu the Kallātam and the Vanniyarpuranam.<sup>4</sup> Tradition attributes the first of these works to Kampan while the last one is said to have been written on the request of a certain Sundara Pāṇḍya, a ruler of Madurai.<sup>5</sup> However, the style and contents of these texts suggest a later date, in all probability the Vijayanagara period. They were produced at a time when the institution of caste had become crystallized and caste consciousness had become acute in society. Like other works of a similar nature these texts were written for the purpose of legitimizing the claims of the Vanniyar for privileges, rank and high social status.

As they are poetical works recording origin myths, traditional accounts and some valuable historical information they have to be studied with caution and the information obtained from them should be handled with utmost care.

Traditions recorded in literature represent the Vanniyar as a caste of professional warriors and this claim receives some confirmation from epigraphic evidence. They are generally described in literature as Kshatriyas of the lineage of the Hindu God Agni. The Kallāṭam, which contains the earliest reference to the Vanniyar, describes them as warriors attached to the four units of the army and attributes to them a mythical origin and royal status. In this work they are said to have been transformed into human beings from twelve young boars and endowed with the sceptre for ruling the land and administering the 'laws'.<sup>6</sup> It is thus clear that the author of the Kallāṭam believed that the Vanniyar were a class of professional warriors who had acquired military and administrative functions as in the case of the Kshatriyas.

The Cilai eḷupatu, which describes poetically their martial characteristics, armour and cavalry, asserts that the Vanniyar were of the Campukulam and traces their origin from the sacrificial fires of Campu.<sup>7</sup> This text incidentally also mentions that the Vanniyar were of Pallava descent and such a description is of considerable significance in investigating the origins and development of the Vanniyar as a community of warriors in the South Indian historical context.

Another text, the Vanniyarpurānam, gives a similar but more elaborate description of the origins of the Vanniyar. Its account may be summarized as follows:

The Vanniyar emerged when Vātāpi, son of Kācipan, who had acquired great prowess through penances, was ruling the world committing grave injustices. When the sage Campu dropped the Ceṅkaḷunīr flower given to him by Siva into the sacrificial fire, Rudra Vanniyar appeared on a horse, accompanied by thousands of warriors armed with such weapons as the bow, spear, sword and the trident. On the instructions of the sage they vanquished Vātāpi and delivered the land from his tyranny<sup>8</sup>.

The foregoing account is a legend and it cannot be cited as evidence in any historical reconstruction. In traditional Hindu Society when communities or groups of people, which had once been insignificant, rise to positions of high rank and social status their claims to such positions had to be legitimized in accordance with traditional norms. As the claims to high status and rank were based on considerations of birth, and when the origins were obscure, and as there was no tradition of any historical investigation of the social origins

of communities, origin myths became the most convenient and effective instruments of legitimation. Such myths were to be found in abundance in the vast literature of India. As the Vanniyar had acquired the status of warriors in medieval Tamil society the authors of the literary compositions which sought to glorify and extoll their prowess and attainments adopted the origin myths of the Kshatriyas, the warriors of North India. Consequently the Vanniyar were represented as a community sprung from the lineage of Agni in some of the Tamil texts. It may be recalled here that tradition claims that the Rajputs had their origins in the sacrificial fires at Mt. Abu.

There is, however, no unanimity in Tamil literary traditions about the origins of the Vanniyar. All texts which contain references or descriptions about them attribute to them a mythological origin: the *Kallāṭam* traces their descent from the boar while the other works trace their origin to the fire. This contradiction in the tradition makes it evident that the claim that the Vanniyar were kshatriyas of the Agnikula has no historical foundation. All the texts concerning the Vanniyar are from the Cōḷa period onwards and were written at a time when the Vanniyar had emerged as a caste of professional warriors and when some of their leaders had even attained the rank of feudatory or independent princes. It may be recalled here that the *Cilai eḷupatu* mentions that the Vanniyar possessed the royal dignity and were entitled to the paraphernalia of royalty.<sup>9</sup> The *Vanniyarpūrāṇam* is probably more accurate in asserting that they belonged to the families of feudatory chieftains.<sup>10</sup>

The derivation of the word Vanniyar could be explained in two ways. The first and the traditional one is that it is a derivative from Vanni which is a Tamilised form of the Sanskrit expression Vahni meaning fire. Although such an explanation is consistent with the traditional accounts of the origins of the vanniyar as recorded in Tamil literature it will not help us to trace their social origins as it is based on a legend. The traditions of the fire-origin of the Vanniyar by itself cannot be an evidence of any ethnic affinity between the Rajputs and the Vanniyar. Besides, there are no traditions among the Vanniyar which claim that they are the descendants of Rajputs who had migrated to the Tamil country.

The second and the more plausible explanation of the word is that it is the Tamilised form of Vanya, the Sanskrit equivalent of the Tamil word *Kāṭavan* meaning an inhabitant of a jungle tract. The Pallavas of Kanchi and the feudal chieftains who ruled from Kanchi from about the twelfth century and claimed Pallava descent were referred to as *Kāṭavar*.<sup>11</sup> The Pallava kings had the epithet *Kāṭavarkōn*, 'the king of the people of the forest'. They were so described, presumably, on account of the fact that their

realm corresponded to Toṅṭaimaṅṭalam, which in ancient times was covered with jungle. Traditions recorded in ancient Tamil poetical works, the Paṭṭinappālai in particular suggest that Toṅṭaimaṅṭalam was inhabited by pastoral communities and jungle tribes and credit the Chola king Karikālan with having cleared forests, extended arable lands and established settlements in that region.<sup>12</sup> These traditions are partially corroborated by some of the accounts preserved in the Mackenzie Collection. The 'Ancient History of Toṅṭaimaṅṭalam' in that collection may be summarized as follows:

Toṅṭaimaṅṭalam was originally a vast forest inhabited by wild beasts and primitive tribes. Subsequently the Kurumpar came from the Karnāṭaka country, established a kingdom, divided the land into twenty four units called Kōṭṭam and set up fortifications. Thereafter, the land acquired the name Kurumpar bhūmi. The Kurumpar also promoted commerce between their land and Kāvēri ppaṭṭinam. The Kurumpar were shepherds, weavers, lime sellers and traders. In course of time various kings of civilized countries made inroads into Toṅṭaimaṅṭalam and eventually the Chola king of Tanjore conquered the land after a protracted struggle.

The foregoing brief account about the physiography and ethnography of Toṅṭaimaṅṭalam in ancient times is basically consistent with the impressions formed on the basis of references in ancient Tamil texts. It was a land covered with extensive jungle tracts and was included in the category of land called mullai one of the five broad physiographic units into which the Tamil country was traditionally divided. Moreover, this extensive tract of land was occupied by pastoral communities such as the Mullaiyar, Potuvar, Aṅḍar, Āyar and Itaiyar who were later integrated more effectively with the Tamil population of the riverine plains as a result of the conjunction of political and military events and the assimilative agencies of the Hindu cultural tradition.<sup>14</sup>

Since the Vanniyar are concentrated in the districts which were included in medieval Toṅṭaimaṅṭalam and because of the fact that most of the chieftains called Vanniyar were from that region it could be inferred that the Vanniyar developed as a distinctive social group in that region. This is consistent with the explanation that the word Vānniyar is derived from Vanya, the Sanskrit equivalent of kāṭavan. As noticed earlier, only the rulers of Toṅṭaimaṅṭalam, the Pallavas of Kanchi and the kāṭava chieftains who claimed Pallava descent, had the epithets kāṭavan and kāṭavarkon which signified their authority over the land covered by

jungle tracts and the people occupying them. It is relevant to consider here the claim made in the Cilai eḷupathu that the Pallavar and Malayamannar were Vanniyar.

It may be suggested that the Vanniyar were originally a group of pastoral communities confined to the forest tracts in the northern part of the Tamil country. The transformation of the Vanniyar from their original status of shepherds and hunters into a community of professional warriors must have been a process connected with the development of large and powerful kingdoms in Toṅṭaimaṅṭalam and Cholaṅṅṭalam and the assimilative character of Hindu social organization and cultural tradition. They probably took to military service in considerable numbers in the Pallava kingdom and developed as a community of professional warriors with a tradition of chivalry and became prominent under the Cholas and developed the military system they inherited from the Pallavas.

#### The Vanniyar in the Chola Kingdom

The earliest epigraphic notices on the Vanniyar are from the period of the Cholas. In the region of Rajendra II (1052-1064) a certain Vanniya Revan is said to have joined the Chalukya ruler in his war against the Cholas but Rajendra claims to have defeated him along with many Chalukya feudatories.<sup>15</sup> The precise nature of the relationship between Revan and the Chalukyas of Kalyāṇi is not known. He may have been a feudatory or a warrior in the service of the Chalukyas. It could even be surmised that he was a Bāṇa or Vaidumba princeling who had sought and obtained protection under the rulers of Kalyāṇi.

An inscription from Kāñcipuram, engraved during the time of Rājarāja II (1163-1178) mentions a unit of land called Vanniyapaṛṛu. It records a resolution of the assembly of the nāṭṭavar of Jayaṅkoṅṭa Cōḷamaṅṭalam remitting a part of the kaṭamai of lands held as Devadāna, Paḷḷiccantam Akarapparru, Māṭṭappnram, Jīvitappaṛṛu, paṭaippaṛṛu and Vanniyapaṛṛu.<sup>16</sup> What is referred to here as Vanniyapaṛṛu is apparently a unit of land held on service tenure. The remuneration for royal service under the imperial Cholas was mostly in the form of land assignments. Such assignments for military service were known variously as Paṭalppaṛṛu, Vīrabhoga and Vanniya-parru.<sup>17</sup> The last of these was apparently a unit of land granted by the king to a regiment of Vanniyar in return for military service. The evidence of this inscription suggests that there were many landholdings

under the Vanniyar, in *Toṅṭaimaṅṭalam*, but their number and extent cannot be ascertained unless further evidence is brought to light.

In the Chola kingdom three lines of feudatory chieftains, namely the Malayamān chiefs of Malayamānāṭu otherwise called Jananātha Valanāṭu, the Gangas of Paṅkaḷanāṭu and the Cāmpuvarāyar of Paṭaiyiṭu appear to have borne the epithet Vanniya(r)nāyan. All the principalities under these chieftains were in *Toṅṭaimaṅṭalam*. The Malayamān chiefs, the most important among them, ruled over Malayamānāṭu from the reign of Kulottunga I (1070 - 1122) onwards.<sup>18</sup> There were two branches of the Malayamān family one of which ruled over a part of Malayamānāṭu from Kiḷiyūr while the other branch which was settled at *Āṭaiyūr*, held the other part of the same principality.

The chiefs of Malayamānāṭu are known to have had the epithets Malayamān, Periya uṭaiyān, Cēṭiyārāyan and Vāṅakovaraiyan.<sup>19</sup> During the reigns of Rājādhirāja II (1153 - 1178) and Kulottunga III they had the additional epithet Vanniya(r)nāyan. Rājarāja Cēṭiyārāyan otherwise called Irāiyūran Carukkuṭātān Vanniya(nāyan) is known from the inscriptions of the 6th year of Rājādhirāja.<sup>20</sup> Raman Porukutaṅkuṭuttān otherwise called Vanniya Devendra Malayamān had succeeded him by the 10th year of Rājādhirāja.<sup>21</sup>

During the early years of Kulottunga III the chieftain who ruled over Malayamānāṭu from Kiḷiyūr was Rājarāja Kōvalrāyan Vanniya(nāyan).<sup>22</sup> This chief who continued to be in authority until at least A. D. 1200 had the additional epithet Palavāyudha Vallabha "Proficient in the use of many weapons".<sup>23</sup> He was a son of Rājarāja Cēṭiyārāyan, who was a general and feudatory of Rājādhirāja II.<sup>24</sup> Another general and feudatory of Rājādhirāja was Narasimhavarman Karikālacōlan, the Malayamān of *Āṭaiyūr*, who is described in inscriptions as Vanniya(makka)lnāyan.<sup>25</sup> Evidently he was one of the generals sent by the Chola government to support the Pāṇḍya prince Kulasekhara in his wars against the armies of Parākramabāhu I.<sup>26</sup>

A Ganga chief of Paṅkaḷanāṭu, Kūttāṭuntēvan Prthivīgangan is described as Vanniya(mātevan) in a few epigraphs from Tiruvaṅṅamālai. An inscription from Kappalūr attests that he had the additional epithet *Ānaikaṭṭina*, "the one who tied the elephant". Prthivīgangan and his son, Cōlendraciṅka Prthivīgangan otherwise called Alakiya Cōlan were contemporaries of Kulottunga III.<sup>28</sup>

The Cāmpuvarāyar chiefs who claimed Pallava descent also appear to have borne the epithet Vanniya(r)nāyan. An epigraphic record of the 38th year of

Kulottunga III refers to Ceñēñi Ammaiappan Cāmpuvarāyan as a Vanniya(r)nāyan.<sup>29</sup> He may, provisionally, be identified with Ceñkeni Ammaiappan otherwise called Vikramacōḷa Cāmpuvarāyan, an ally of Narasimhavarman Karikālacōḷa Cāmpuvarāyan, who was the Malayamān of Āṭaiyūrñāṭu.<sup>30</sup>

The epithet Vanniya(r)nāyan, a variant of which was Vanniyarmakkaḷnāyan may be defined as one that denoted a dignitary who was either a general who had regiments of Vanniyar under his charge or a chief of the people called Vanniyar. During the period of the imperial Cholas the word Vanniyar appears to have acquired two meanings. Firstly, it denoted a particular group of people, a community, as suggested by the expression Vanniyar makkaḷ. Secondly it signified the rank of a feudatory chieftain as suggested by an inscription of the reign of Kulottunga III, which records a compact between two Malayamans of Kiliyūr, Rājarāja Cētiyarāyan and Aḷakiyacōḷan Ākārācūran. This epigraphic record testifies that they agreed to perform jointly and in collaboration the irājakāriyam, "the service for the king", and the service for the Vanniyar. The Vanniyar was evidently a dignitary of a higher rank than that held by the two chieftains referred to in the inscription and one who could command their allegiance and service.<sup>31</sup>

Some of the Vanniyar apparently had close connections with the Veḷaiikkāḷar. Several ephigraphs from Tirukkōyilūr record the vow of loyalty taken by several Veḷaiikkāḷar to Vanniyaranāyan Rājarāja Cētiyarāyan, the Malayamān of Kiliyūr.<sup>32</sup> The Veḷaiikkāḷar pledged individually and in some cases jointly to serve and defend him even at the cost of their lives and to perish with him in the event of his death. Besides, they also promised that they would never accept service under any other master. Such instances of a very high sense of personal loyalty and dedicated service are, perhaps peculiar to this period in the history of South India. The Veḷaiikkāḷar in the service of these chieftains were a sort of retainers displaying some of the characteristics of the "household warriors" of the European feudal society.

Inscriptions testify that some of the malayamans were Vēḷaiikkāḷar. Cētiyarāyan Malayamān, Kōvalāya malayamān kiḷiyūran and Palavāyudha Vallabha Malayamān are described as Veḷaiikkāḷar in the service of Irāiyūran Cētiyarāyan Vanniyanāyan of Kiliyūr, a feudatory of Rājādhirāja II.<sup>33</sup> Evidently the Malayamān family of chiefs belonged to the group of Veḷaiikkāḷar. As the Malayamān chiefs were both Vanniyar and Vēḷaiikkāḷar it could be inferred that some of the Vēḷaiikkāḷar were Vanniyar. Such an impression gains support from the text of an inscription which describes a Vēḷaiikkāḷar

of Rājarāja Cētiyarān as Vanniyanācci<sup>34</sup> As Vanniyanācci is a feminine form of Vanniyanāyan one who had the epithet Vanniyanāyan could be a Veḷḷaikkāran. The Chola feudatories called Vanniya(r)nāyan exercised authority over certain principalities which were for the most part contiguous, on a hereditary basis. Some of them held sway over large territorial divisions and had considerable power and influence. The Malayamān Cētiyarāyan, for instance, had under his jurisdiction the divisions of Malayamānāṭu, Vāṇakōppāṭināṭu, Ceṅkuraṇāṭu and Uṭaikkāṭṭu naṭu.<sup>35</sup> These chieftains maintained armies of their own and as part of their obligations presumably supplied their Chola overlord with a certain number of troops whenever necessity arose. Many of them served as generals in the armies of the Cholas and were honoured for their valour and heroic feats in war. Epithets such as, āṇaikaṭṭina, "the one who tied the elephant", Carukkuṭṭātān "the one who does not yield", and Palavāyudha Vallabha, "the one who is proficient in the use of many weapons" were presumably conferred on them by the Chola kings<sup>36</sup>

Almost all the Vanniya chiefs like all other Chola feudatories had their names prefixed with either an epithet or a consecration name of one of the Chola kings as a mark of respect and loyalty to their suzerain. The Malayamān Iraiyūran Vanniyanāyan was otherwise called Rājarāja Cētiyarāyan.<sup>37</sup> His son Malayamān Kōvlarāyan also had the same name.<sup>38</sup> Amattālvān, the Malayamān of Aṭaiyūr during the reigns of Rājādhirāja II and Kulottunga III had the epithet Karikālacōlan.<sup>39</sup> The son of Prthivīgangan of Paṅkalanāṭu, who was a contemporary of Kulottunga III, was called Alakiyacōlan.<sup>40</sup> The Campurāyar chiefs of the time of Rājādhirāja II and his successors had such names as Rājanārāyaṇa and Vikrama Chola prefixed to their own ones.<sup>41</sup>

In the reign of Rājādhirāja, his Vanniya feudatories, the Malayamān and Cāmpuvarāyar chiefs in particular exercised authority over their respective principalities with little interference from their overlord and yet remained loyal to him and supported the Chola king in his wars. During the early years of his vigorous and warlike successor, Kulottunga III, the same spirit of harmony and close co-operation characterized the relations between the Chola king and his feudatories. But, towards the end of his long reign Kulottunga had become enfeebled by age and his government which had exhausted its resources was no longer capable of sustaining its authority over rebellious and overweening vassals.



A notable development in the reign of Kulottunga III was the formation of alliances and counter alliances among his feudatories some of whom were Vanniyar chiefs. The Malayamān of Āṭaiyān, Karikāla cōlan, Vikrama Cōla Cāmpuvarāyan otherwise called Ceṅkēṅi Ammaiappan and the Atikaimān Viṭukāṭalakiya cōlan had contracted an alliance.<sup>42</sup> One of the terms of their agreement was that the Atikaimān should refrain from contracting any alliance with certain other chiefs including Sīyagan. Another epigraph, engraved in the 28th year of Kulottunga, records an agreement between two Malayaman chiefs of Kiḷiyū. Ṭṛaiyūran Periyaiyān otherwise called Rājārāja Cetiyaṛāyan and Aḷakiyanāyan Ākārācūran. Each of the two chiefs pledged to support and defend the other with all the cavalry and infantry under his command. For his part, Ākārācūran promised to refrain from having any dealings with Vānakovaraiyan and inform his ally of any overtures made to him by that chief. Besides, they decided that they should discharge their obligations to the king and should jointly extend support to the Vanniyar. They also agreed that each of them should retain all lands held by them until the 28th year of their sazerain but all territories acquired thereafter should be divided into equal shares between them.<sup>43</sup>

The tone and contents of this inscription suggest that the Chola kingdom had reached an advanced state of disintegration. The compacts among feudatories made without any reference to the Chola king presupposes that royal authority over the feudatory principalities had altogether ceased to be effective. Yet, the fact that two chieftains referred to in the inscription took care to profess loyalty and allegiance to the Chola king provide some indication of the fact that the prestige of the Chola dynasty was still a factor to be reckoned with even in Toṅṭaimaṅṭalam.

The alliances such as the one entered into between the two Malayam chiefs were primarily local arrangements for defence and acquisition of territories and were designed against rival chieftains. The rivalries and feuds among local chieftains threatened to disrupt the Chola kingdom and undermine the effectiveness of the instruments and agencies of Chola dyanastic authority. The Chola monarchy was no longer capable of assembling the forces of its feudatories for purposes of defence. The formidable military power which it once possessed was now fragmented and distributed among feudatory chieftains entangled in local conflicts. It was at this stage in the erosion of Chola dyanastic power that Māravarman Sundara Pāṇḍya delivered his blows against the Chola monarchy from which it never really recovered.

The Pāṇḍya invasion had the effect of advancing further the process of disintegration within the Chola kingdom where feudatory princes became openly defiant and hostile towards the Chola king and they no longer felt the need to honour their obligations to him. In such a situation the compacts made earlier among local chieftains proved to be very useful and a weak Chola king could not reduce to submission a combination of many feudatory princes.

Most of the Chola feudatories were allies and during the time of Rājārāja III their ties were further cemented by matrimonial alliances. The Cāmpuvarāyar were related to the Kāṭava chiefs and soon came under the influence of the rebellious and aggressive Kāṭava Kōpperuñcin̄kan.<sup>44</sup> The Malayamān Cēṭiyarāyan who continued to be loyal to Rājārāja was won over by the Kāṭava chief whose daughter was married to the Malayamān.<sup>45</sup> The Bāṇa chief was already hostile to Rājārāja.<sup>46</sup> The turbulence of these chiefs may be said to have contributed in some measure to the fall of the Chola monarchy and the Pāṇḍya conquest of the Chola dominions.

The Pāṇḍya power attained imperial dimensions after the extensive conquests of Jaṭāvarman Sundara Pāṇḍya (1251 - 1268). He conquered Cōḷa maṅṅalam and Toṅṅaimaṅṅalam and consolidated his power in these regions during the early years of his reign. The Vanniya chiefs in the northern part of the Tamil country presumably became Pāṇḍya feudatories during the mid-thirteenth century but our knowledge about the relationship that existed between these chieftains and the suzerian power during the period of Pāṇḍya ascendancy is extremely meagre.

A. Sri Lankan Pali text, the Upāsaka janālaṅkāra mentions that a certain Codaganga, one of the Pāṇḍya feudatories, was a Vaṅṅya Sāmanata.<sup>47</sup> He is said to have provided support and maintenance to Buddhist monks who had fled to the Tamil country during the confusion which followed Māgha's conquest of the island in 1215. An epigraph of the 10th year of Maravarman Kulasekhara (1268 - 1310) from Mogalur in the Tirukkōyilūr Taluk mentions of a certain Pichchan Vanniya-peramāḷ.<sup>48</sup> The provenance of this inscription would suggest that this individual was connected to the Malayaman family of chieftains who held the rank of Vanniya during the period of Chola supremacy.

There are some incidental references to Vanniya soldiers serving in the ranks of the Pāṇḍya armies during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Pāṇḍya records of this period mention the Perumpaṭai, a unit of the Pāṇḍya army, which was sometimes permanently stationed at certain localities. It was a com-

posite unit like the *Veḷaikkārar* and evidently included such groups as the *Vanniya Vaṭṭam*, *Canarese*, *Telugus*, *Āriyar*, *Kaḷḷar*, *Villikaḷ* (bowmen) and the *Uṭṭankūṭṭam* (*Sahavāsis*).<sup>49</sup> As the epigraph which enumerates these groups, mentions of the *Vanniyar* before others it may be assumed that they formed an important element in the *Pāṇḍya* armies.

The employment of the *Vanniyar* for military service under the *Pāṇḍyas* seems to have led to their settlements in the *Pāṇḍya* kingdom. Such settlements were to be found during the period of the *Madurai Sultanate* in the fourteenth century. An inscription from *Kundādevi* near *Devakotta* testifies that there were several *Vanniyar* residents in the country.<sup>50</sup>

### The *Vijayanagara* Conquest and the decline of *Vanniyar* power

The details pertaining to the *Vanniyar* during the *Vijayanagara* period are mostly obscure and the scanty information obtained from stray references in inscriptions and traditional accounts presents a rather confused outline of their history. It would appear that the *Vanniyar* chieftains of *Toṅṅaimaṅṅalam* were reduced to submission by the kings of *Vijayanagara* during the late fourteenth century and that their principalities were incorporated into the fabric of the *Vijayanagara* state as feudatory provinces. The local chieftains continued to retain their traditional ranks and privileges and those among them who proved to be loyal were suitably rewarded and became the trusted lieutenants and agents of the *Karnāṭaka* rulers. Yet, as in the case of most feudatory princes, the *Vanniyar* tended to disregard the claims of their suzerain whenever centrifugal forces gathered momentum within the *Vijayanagara* state. It would appear that, in such circumstances, the resistance of local rulers had to be put down with considerable difficulty.

The chieftaincies of the *Vanniyar* in *Toṅṅaimaṅṅalam* came under the influence of *Vijayanagara* during the latter part of the fourteenth century. The *Madhurāvijayam* asserts that prince *Kampana* was instructed by his father to subdue the 'Vanni kings' during the course of his expedition to the Tamil country. The *Cāmpuvarāyar* of *Paṭṭaivīṭṭu* and the *Kāṭava* chieftains were among those chieftains who were defeated by *Kampana* around 1365 and consequently they came under *Vijayanagara* overlordship while retaining their territorial possessions and traditional ranks almost unimpaired. Inscriptions testify that feudatory chieftains styled *Vanniyar* continued to exercise authority in some parts of the Tamil country during the *Vijayanagara* period. One such chieftain was *Vanniyarār Aṭaikkalaṅkāṭṭār* otherwise called *Vicayālaya tēvar*, who is said to have granted a piece of land to the *Ūravar*

(residents) of Talayānilai and Parali. There are also epigraphic references to Pradhāni Vanniyar, who were presumably local chieftains or warriors serving as agents of the Vijayanagara government.

The Vijayanagara government, however, could not always count on the loyalty and support of feudatories in the Tamil country. The Vanniyar, as in the case of most other feudatory chieftains, were animated by a strong spirit of local independence and sought to free themselves from their obligations to the suzerain whenever the latter's prestige and power suffered a sharp decline. Succession disputes and the disloyalty of provincial governors often tended to aggravate political instability at the Vijayanagara capital. Under circumstances when central control cannot be maintained over the southern provinces the feudatories ignored the claims of their suzerain and asserted their independence.

The Vanniyar would appear to have been among the most refractory of such chieftains and it became necessary for the Vijayanagara government to make repeated and concerted efforts to suppress them as suggested by the following account:

Anciently the curumbar ruled in this country: Adondai Cholan came from Tanjore, destroyed them; and having acquired the title of Adondai Charkravartti he established in their place the Kondai katti Vellazhar. In those days the Vanniar, or Palli people by Permission of the ruler of the country built this fort for themselves, as their own. But they paid tribute to the sovereigns of Andhra, Carnata, and Dravida countries. No written account of their posterity has survived. In course of time Canda Rayen and Chetu rayen came to the government. Being skilful men they built their old fort very strongly.

While ruling with considerable power, they rejected all claims of customary tribute from superior kings. They were both illustrious; but candavan rayen was the more illustrious of the two. He fixed alarming stations on eminences at certain distances, around his capitl. There was no other king like him. When the rayer came to invade him, as the drums were beaten at different hill stations, the rayer did not know in which the chief was, and at length the latter, watching his opportunity, fell on the rayer's forces, and made greater slaughter. The rayer's general, being greatly incensed came with a greater force: and during four months, an uncertain war was carried on; the chief's place not being known; while, night and day he harassed the troops of the invader. The rayer now desisted from open

war; intending to effect his object indirectly. Candavar Rayen then greatly vexed the agriculturists that Adondai Chakravathi had placed in the land. The Vellazhar in consequence arose in a body, and went to Krishna Rayer who sent the Wiyalavar (the people of the Poligar) against Candava, The Poligar being beaten retreated, and sent spies to inspect the fortress, that he might discover how to overcome Candava.'

Candava is said to have been poisoned by one of his dancing girls who was bribed heavily by his enemies. His brother, Chetu Rayen, retaliated and fought bitterly for twenty - eight days against the armies of the Rāya but eventually his citadel fell and became a dependency of Vijayanagara.<sup>51</sup>

The foregoing account deserves special attention as it records some historical information, not found elsewhere, about two Vanniyar chieftains, Candavarayan and Chetu rayan, who defied the authority of the Vijayanagara government. They are said to have been the contemporaries of Krishna (deva) Raya who eventually suppressed their rebellion and re-established Vijayanagara overlordship over their principality. Besides, the account presupposes that these chieftains had exercised authority over a part of Toṅṅaimaṅṅalam. Indeed, it was in that part of the Tamil country that principalities subject to chieftains styled Vanniyar had existed since the late Chola period. Moreover, this account suggests that the community of Vanniyar, whom it identifies with the paḷiḷi people, were natives of Toṅṅaimaṅṅalam where they had lived along with other communities from ancient times. The tradition that the Vanniyar had been tributary to the Andhra, Karnataka and Dravida kings at different times is also noteworthy. It may be mentioned here that the Vanniyar chieftains had been tributary to the Chola, Hoysala and Vijayanagara kings at different times. The probable accuracy of the details in the account of Candavarayan and Cheturayan is suggested by the fact that they are consistent with the impressions about the Vanniyar gained from other sources.

The subjugation of the recalcitrant Vanniyar chieftains appears to have been considered as a remarkable achievement by the Vijayanagara rulers and care was taken by court officials to record it conventionally in the inscriptional preambles. In many inscriptions the Vijayanagara king is described as "the one who took the heads of the Vanniyar of the eighteen districts".<sup>52</sup>

Some of the Vijayanagara feudatories in the Tamil country also claimed in their inscriptions to have punished "the Vanni kings". The Cūraikkuṭi chiefs were among those who claimed to have vanquished the Vanniyar. In an inscription of the reign Achutarāya, Vicayālaya tēvar otherwise called

Cūraikkuṭi aracu paḷḷikoṇṭa perumāḷ claims to have defeated and driven away the eighteen Vanniyar.<sup>53</sup> His son, Acchutappa Vicayālayatēvar, also made the same claims<sup>54</sup> In a record from Āḷaṅkuṭi in Tiruvarankuḷam, Tirumalārācappallavārāyar, the chief of Aḷuntūr is said to have destroyed the eighteen Vanniyar.<sup>55</sup>

The Setupatis of Ramnad are known to have had the epithet 'Corimuttu Vanniya cūriyan.' Besides, in their inscriptions they also claim to have crushed the refractory Vanniyar.<sup>56</sup> This claim, however, does not seem to have any historical foundation. During the Vijayanagara period it had become conventional even among the feudatories to incorporate in their prasastis the claims of the early Vijayanagara rulers, which of course had some historical basis.

There are some incidental references to the community of Vanniyar in Vijayanagara inscriptions which testify that they were an important group in society in respect of both numbers and economic functions. They are referred to in relation to matters concerning revenue and local protests against the extortions of government officials and land holders. The Vanniyar were among the castes which paid the communal tax (inavari).<sup>57</sup> An epigraph records that the Iṭāṅkai residents of the villages around Chandragiri together with the Vanniyar consented to a portion of the taxes collected at Tiruvalliyātāyam being paid to the temple.<sup>58</sup>

In some inscriptions of the fifteenth century which record the proceedings of local protest movements against unjust exactions by government officials and tenure holders the Vanniyar are associated with the government officers and the Brāhmana and Veḷḷāḷa landholders. The extract of the relevant portions of these inscriptions as summarized by Noburu Karashima and Y. Subbarayalu runs:

- (i) "We, the people belonging to Valangai 98 and Idangai 98 of Valudilampatṭu Uchāvadi, assembled in this temple in full strength and let the following be engraved on the wall of the said temple"
- (ii) "In this maṅḍalam (Valudilampatṭu), even if the Uchāvadi pradāni (the local Vijayanagar governor), Vanniyar (military people) and jīvita-kkārār (holders of official tenure) coerce us or the Brāhman and Veḷḷāḷa kāṇiyāḷar (holders of kani right) try to oppress us in collusion with the irājagaratṭār (government officers), we shall never submit to such oppression."

- (iii) ' If there appears any single person among us who helps the intruders, betray us, violates the grant given by Chikkarasar, or destroys the (current) measuring rod, we shall assemble as of today and enquire into it''
- (iv) ''Among those who were born in this maṇḍalam, no one should write accounts (for the government), let others write the accounts or collude with the government officers and jīvitakkārars. If there appears one such person, we shall degrade him in the caste hierarchy.''59

In the foregoing account the Vanniyar are classed along with 'the provincial governor', Uchavadi pradhāni, the irajakarattār or government officials, the jīvitakkārars or holders of official tenure and the Kāṇiyālar generally described as the holders of Kāṇi right. All these groups of people are accused of unjust conduct and are said to have collaborated in coercing the Valangai and Idangai communities to confirm to their decisions. As the exactions proved to be intolerable the communities which were subject to oppression responded with a stern disapproval and decided on a course of non co-operation against the government officials and the landholders who collaborated with them.

Although the inscriptions concerned do not specify in which capacity the Vanniyar were involved in the process, the fact that they are accused along with others of exercising coercive methods and the consideration that they were usually associated with the military profession in earlier times suggest that they were engaged in military functions. Such an explanation presupposes that Vanniyar soldiers were engaged for military service in some parts of the Tamil country during the Vijayanagara period. The movement of the Vanniyar from Toṇṭaimaṇṭalam into the districts of Cholamaṇḍalam which had commenced earlier, under the Cholas, seems to have continued with considerable intensity during the centuries that followed the Vijayanagara conquest of the Tamil country.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Reference may be made to the following works: H. A. Stuart, Madras District Gazetteers: North Arcot, Vol. II, p. 21; F. Cox, Madras District Manuals: North Arcot (Madras, 1895), p. 235; The Chingleput Late Madras District: A Manual (Madras, 1879), p. 138; Lewis Moore, A Manual of the Trichinopoly District (Madras, 1875), p. 102; Madras District Gazetteers - Tanjore (Madras, 1905), pp 82 - 83; F. A. Nicholson, Manual of the Coimbatore District (Madras 1877), pp. 51, 61; A Manual of the Pudukottai State (Pudukottai, 1921), p. 211; J. B. B. Gribble, A Manual of the District of Cuddapan in the presidency of Madras (Madras, 1875).
2. Madras Tamil Lexicon.
3. F. A. Nicholson observes: 'The Padaiyachi, to whose name Palli is some times prefixed, was probably a soldier and under the Chola kings of Kongu the soldiers of Kongu were Vettuar, who, equally with the Padiyachis and Pallis are now called Goundens and are probably equally entitled to be called Vanniyar.' see Manual of the Coimbatore District, p. 61.
4. Cilai elupatu ed. A. Subramanya Nayakar (Madras, 1915); Vanniyarpanam ed. Ponnambalaguru (Tiruppati, 1905).
5. According to the pāyiram, introductory stanzas the author is said to have undertaken the task of writing this treatise on the request made to him by a certain Cuntara Pāṇṭṭiyan that the account of the Vanniyar should be written in the literary form of a purānam.
6. Kallātam ed P. V. Comacuntaranār (Madras, 1963), V. 37.
7. The Cilai elupatu describes the Vanniyar as Campu Kōttira aracar, 'Kings of the lineage of Campu, Paṭaitunaittalaivar, 'leaders of allied armies', Malayannar, Kunravar and Pallavar. This description seems to be based on an authentic tradition. The expression campu kottira aracar apparently refers to the Cāmpuvarayar chieftains who evidently claimed descent from Campu as suggested by the first part of their family name Campuva which means the descendant of Campu. It would appear that the Malayamans are referred to in this text as Malayamannar. The Kāṭava chieftains who claimed Pallava descent could also be described as Vanniyar. The description of the Vanniyar as Paṭaitunaittalaivar is a most appropriate one when we consider the fact that they had in fact been serving as military leaders in



their capacity as subordinate allies under the Cholas and the rulers of Vijayanagara.

8. Vanniyar purānam: Vanniya rājākkal Urpatticarukkam
9. Cilai Elupatu, V. 7
10. They are described as Vēntar upakula Vanniyar which expression may be explained as one which denotes princely families of feudatory status. It is significant that the text does not describe them as members of any royal dynasty, Ventarkulam. see Vanniyar purānam: ciru<sup>s</sup>tic carukkam, V. 10.
11. K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, The Cōlas (2nd edn.) University of Madras, 1955 p. 405.
12. Pat<sup>t</sup>inappālai, 11. 275 - 290 in Pattup pā<sup>t</sup>tu ed. U. V. Caminathaiyar (Madras 1918).
13. William Taylor, An Analysis of the Mackenzie Manuscripts: Section, 7, "Ancient History of Thondamandalam, and its earliest inhabitants called Veddars and Curumbar", pp. 81 - 83.
14. The Cū<sup>t</sup>amani nikaṇṭu testifies that the Potuvar, Aṇṭar, Āyar, Iṭaiyar, kōvintar, kōpālar and Mullaiyar were the communities living in the mullai regions.
15. Madras Epigraphic Reports, Annual Report on Epigraphy (ARE), 1928, p 2; The Cholas, p. 257.
16. The first four of these expressions denote respectively temple lands, land held by Buddhist and Jain monasteries, lands granted to Brahmins and those held by mutts. The lands held on life tenure in return for service were called Jivittappa<sup>r</sup>ru. Such lands held on Military service were generally known as pa<sup>t</sup>aippa<sup>r</sup>ru. The Colas, p. 505.
17. The Colas, pp. 574 - 575
18. ibid , p: 405; Pi<sup>r</sup>kalaccō<sup>l</sup>ar carittiram pp.
19. The Cō<sup>l</sup>as, 405
20. ARE, 1934/35, p. 61D, Nos. 188, 189
21. ibid, pp. 61 - 63, Nos. 125, 186.

22. ARE, 1937/38, No. 381.
23. ARE, 1934/35, Nos. 151, 202.
24. Pīrkālaceōlar Carittiram p. 173
25. South Indian Inscriptions SII, Vol VII, Nos. 117, 120.
26. Pīrkālaceōlar Carittiram, p. 393
27. ARE, 1938/39, p. 77
28. ibid.
29. ARE, 1911, p. 74.
30. SII, Vol VII, No. 119
31. ARE, 1936/37
32. ARE, 1934/35, Nos. 122, 126, 136, 142, 144 - 147, 153 - 159.
33. ARE, 1934/35, Nos. 145, 153, 202.
34. ARE, 1934/35, No. 122.
35. ARE, 1934/35, p. 61, Nos. 186, 190.
36. ARE, 1934/35, Nos. 126, 136, 171;  
ARE, 1938/39, p. 77.
37. Pīrkālaceōlar Carittiram, p. 173.
38. ibid.
39. SII, Vol. II, No. 17.
40. ARE, 1938/39, p. 77.
41. Pīrkālaceōlar Carittiram, pp. 14, 174.
42. ibid, p. 425.
43. ARE, 1934/35, p. 61, No. 189.
44. Pīrkālaceōlar Carittiram, p. 42.
45. ibid.
46. ibid.

47. Upasakajanāṅkārā. ed. Moratōta Dhammakanda Thera, revised by Kosgoda Pannasekhara Thera (Weligama, 1914) p. 157.
48. ARE, 1937/37.
49. T. N. Subramaniam, *South Indian Temple Inscriptions* Vol II (Madras, 1954), p. 662, No.706.
50. S. Krishnaswamy Aiyangar, *South India and her Muhammadan Invaders* (Oxford University Press, 1921), p. 225.
51. W. Taylor. *Analysis of the Mackenzie Manuscripts: Section 7. 'An account of the Candavarayen and Cheturayen, the two sovereigns of the Vannier who ruled in the fort of Tiruvidai churam', pp. 78 - 79.*
52. *South Indian Temple Inscriptions, Vol. I, No. 204.*
53. *Inscriptions of the Pudukottai State (IPS), No. 754.*
54. IPS, No. 752.
55. *ibid.*
56. *Archaeological Survey of Southern India, Setupati copper plate grant, Nos. 1, 3-7, 9, pp. 62, 66, 68,71, 73, 81.*
57. T. V. Mahalingam, *South Indian Polity* (Madras. 1955) p. 170.
58. ARE, 1911. p. 83.  
ARE, 1913, p. 109.
59. Noboru Karashima and Y. Subbarayalu, 'Valangai / Idangai, Kaniyalur and Irajagarattar: Social conflict in Tamil nadu in the 15th Century'. *Socio-cultural change in villages in Tiruchirapalli District, Tamil Nadu, India, Part I, pp. 134 - 135.*
60. This essay is a slightly modified version of a paper presented, under the same title, at the 4th International conference Seminar on Tamil Studies held in January 1974 at Jaffna Sri Lanka.