

THE MILITARY HISTORY OF KURICHIYAN AND MULLUKURUMAN TRIBES OF WAYANAD

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Abstract

Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas are tribes who are natives of Wayanad Plateau. Kurichiyas are also natives to historic region of Kannavam (in Cannanore district). Before British conquest of Keralam, Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas were an important element in the military life of Wayanad which was then a part of kingdom of Kottayam. Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas even though forest tribes, served as soldiers for Kottayam Raja. They were well trained in war and whenever Kottayam Raja or his chieftains in Wayanad went to war, Mullukurumas and Kurichiyas too joined the armed force for the duration of war.

While Kurichiyas trace their origin to soldiers who served in armies of Kottayam Raja during conquest of Wayanad, Mullukurumas trace their origin to brother of last Vedar Raja of Wayanad who was dispossessed by Kottayam Raja. This life style received first blow with invasion of Hyder Ali in 1773. Wayanad which has been peaceful for centuries after conquest by Kottayam Raja was plunged into war and destruction which lasted until 1806 (barring for few years of lull). Previously, they fought for Kottayam Raja in his wars outside Wayanad – but now war arrived in their homeland. Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas on account of their military role and desire to preserve the traditional political order got involved in these prolonged struggles in which they prove themselves to be best of the soldiers.

Keywords

Kottayam- Cotiote War- Padayottam- Guerrilla Warfare

Introduction

Wayanad district of Kerala lay along the border with Karnataka and is an extension of Deccan Plateau. Though no clear picture is available about early history of Wayanad, there is circumstantial evidence that powerful kingdoms in Karnataka exerted their influence and control over Wayanad throughout much of history, directly or indirectly. Whatever it may be, middle of 18th century, Wayanad was

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ruled by a part of kingdom of Kottayam³. This kingdom like most pre-modern polities was a feudal one. At that time, Wayanad had three principal military classes – Wayanad Nayar, Kurichiyan and Mullukuruman.

Why Wayanad had three military classes instead of one deserves to be elaborated. Since early history of Wayanad is obscure, we have to depend on legendary accounts. But since they provide a logical explanation for this phenomenon of three military classes, they need mention. They are as follows –

A Raja of Kumbla⁴ goes on a pilgrimage to Vishnu shrine in Tirunelli. But Veda Raja of Wayanad have him arrested and insisted that he marry his daughter. Kumbla Raja who was in captivity secretly sends message to Rajas of Kottayam and Kurumbranad⁵ to save him. They invade Wayanad, defeats and kill Veda Raja and rescued the Kumbla Raja (Nair, 1911).

Kottayam Raja and Kurumbranad Raja now found themselves in possession of Wayanad and decided to partition it among themselves. But soon Kurumbranad Raja handed over his share as well to Kottayam Raja due to inability to govern the area. (Nair, 1911)

Kottayam Raja's conquest brought two new classes of people to Wayanad – Nayar and Kurichiya. He settled Nayars in Wayanad to rule, police and defend it. With regard to Kurichiyas, they trace origin to Nayar archers from Southern Kerala who served Kottayam Raja in his war with Veda Raja. But when they returned home, their caste-men considered them impure due to foreign residence. They returned to Kottayam and the Raja then allowed them to settle in the forests of Kannavam and Wayanad (Nair, 1911).

Legend attribute origin of Mullukurumas to younger brother of Veda Raja named Aripnan (Nair, 1911). Thus, it is obvious that this legend indicates that Mullukurumas or their ancestors represent their ruling class of Wayanad prior to conquest by Kottayam Raja. Though they lost their power, they continued their military tradition.

³ This is not the present-day Kottayam district – instead it is a kingdom whose capital was located near Koothuparamba in Kannur district at a place named Kottayampoyil which was shortened to Kottayam.

⁴ Kumbla is in Kasaragod district of Kerala.

⁵ A kingdom based at Balussery in Kozhikode district.

Nayars who were installed as vassals in Wayanad had jurisdiction over Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas. A Nayar lord in addition to his Nayar knights also had Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas as armed retainers who would rally under him if served notice. During peace time, Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas engaged in shifting cultivation and hunting.

Though well versed in use of all weaponry, archery was most important for both Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas. Tradition of archery is cherished even today.

Resistance to Mysore Invasions or *Padayottam*⁶

In November of 1773, Hyder Ali invaded Keralam for second time. This time his armies marched into Wayanad (which was a part of Kottayam kingdom) and captured Calicut after descending Tamarassery Pass. From that point onwards until 1779, Wayanad became a battlefield. Hyder was keen on controlling Wayanad because shortest and most direct route from Mysore to Calicut passed through Southern Wayanad. A large Mysore force was even stationed at Kalpetta (Richter, 1870).

During this time, Kottayam was ruled by a weak Raja who fled away and soon leadership was passed to one of his nephews named Kerala Varma also known as Pazhassi Raja. To fight Mysore army in Wayanad, he collected a force in which Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas formed a main share. Since Mysore army was strong, Kottayam force used guerrilla warfare. From 1774 till 1779, they kept on harassing Mysore army and prevented them from consolidating their control over Wayanad. In 1779, Mysore army was encircled and destroyed and Wayanad was freed from Mysore rule (Richter, 1870) (Kurup, 1980) (Logan, 1887).

In 1786, war once more started in Wayanad. Tipu, successor of Hyder Ali had forcefully made Kottayam Raja (uncle of Pazhassi Raja) to surrender Wayanad. Pazhassi Raja as well as people of Wayanad resented this and started guerrilla war once more in 1787. Tipu put far more effort than his father Hyder Ali in subjugating Wayanad. He and his troops caused widespread destruction and conducted terrible atrocities to crush guerrilla warfare. But none of this had any effect on guerrilla warfare by Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas. They not only continued resistance but even raided deep beyond Wayanad into Mysore proper as far as Nanjangode (Buchanan, 1807). War in Wayanad lasted until 1793 – a total of six years. (Logan, 1887)

⁶ Padayottam in Malayalam means military campaign – any military campaign. But in local parlance of Malabar, this refers to military operations by Hyder Ali and Tipu of Mysore conducted between 1766 and 1790.

Resistance to British or *Cotiote War*

Kurichiyas of Kannavam once more were thrust into war in 1793 until 1805 – for twelve years – this time against English East India Company. During early years of struggle led by Pazhassi Raja, from 1793 until 1800, Kurichiyas of Kannavam played a key role. These struggles were known as **Cotiote War**⁷. Kannavam region during this period was one of the main head-quarters of Pazhassi Raja. From 1793 until 1800, Kannavam Kurichiyas played a key role in disrupting English troops and their local collaborators from plundering Western Kottayam (in modern Cannanore district) in the name of revenue collection (Logan, 1887) (Kurup, 1980).

They also took active part in the more than 100 battles fought between English East India Company and Kottayam in 1797. Wayanad was most at peace from 1793 until 1800 except for 1796-1797 when British troops invaded Wayanad briefly. They faced skilful guerrilla warfare in which Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas played an important role. British force which invaded Wayanad was harassed so much that they had to retreat. During this retreat, this force was destroyed at Periya Pass by a force of Kottayam – in which Mullukurumas as well as both Wayanad and Kannavam Kurichiyas were involved. (Logan, 1887) (Kurup, 1980)

In 1800, war between Pazhassi Raja and English East India Company spread into Wayanad. Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas of Wayanad were now deeply involved as war has once more reached their homeland. British strategy to crush resistance in Wayanad (in which tribes like Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas were very much involved) was to overwhelm Wayanad and neighbourhood with thousands of British troops. In 1801, it looked as if British had won. But in October of 1802, war once more took a U turn with the capture of Panamaram fort when a small band of Kurichiyas led by Edachena Kunkan and Thalakkal Chandu launched a surprise attack and seized the fort and slaughtered the British garrison. Note that British had more men and had firearms whereas Kurichiyas were only armed with bows and machetes (Logan, 1887) (Kurup, 1980).

This incident alone points to the military skill of Kurichiyas and general ship of Thalakkal Chandu. After this event, troops of Pazhassi Raja once more rallied to fight British and launched a guerrilla campaign from 1802 October to 1804 February – this campaign by Pazhassi Raja in which not only Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas fought, but also Thalakkal Chandu, a Kurichiyan general played a key role in planning and execution – which knocked out the entire Bombay army

⁷ Cotiote is the Anglicized form of Kottayath or Kottayam. British sources from late 18th-early 19th centuries refer to their struggles with Pazhassi Raja as Cotiote War.

of British – equivalent to one-third of total British military in India had few parallels in history of Indian resistance to British imperialism (Kurup, 1980).

After British captured initiative in 1804 by destroying bulk of Kottayam army at Second Battle of Irikkur, the war became more and more concentrated in Wayanad. Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas had to suffer severely in 1804-1805 period as British hunted them relentlessly. But despite all the suffering they refused to abandon the struggle. It is worth noting that thousands of Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas had been gathering to launch a major assault on British in 1805 when Thalakkal Chandu was caught and killed. Importance of Thalakkal Chandu in victories of Pazhassi Raja is clearly demonstrated when Edachena Kunkan, commander in chief of Pazhassi Raja, on learning about Chandu's death remarked that "he had lost his right hand" (Logan, 1887), (Kurup, 1980).

In 1812, seven years after death of Thalakkal Chandu, Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas once more rose in revolt to overthrow British rule in Wayanad. This was because of the exploitative revenue policy of English authorities. Whole of Wayanad for a couple of months fell into control of Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas. But unfortunately, revolt swiftly collapsed. Many of those who took part in this revolt were either veterans of war fought by Pazhassi Raja or the sons/nephews of those who fought under Pazhassi Raja.

Analysis of Tactics and Weapons⁸

Before going to conclude, a brief account of nature of guerrilla warfare waged by Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas and their weapons of war must be given. Guerrilla warfare waged by tribes like Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas was reliant on geography. It was essentially a forest war. In late 18th and early 19th centuries, much of North Keralam was covered by forests. Towns and villages were like islands in a sea of forest. After each hamlet, forest without any human presence stretched for miles. When invaders like Mysoreans and British invaded, local military forces comprising Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas could not fight them in open combat.

Invaders were heavily armed with artillery and vast quantities of ammunition. In contrast, local forces had only limited supply of ammunition and hardly any artillery and limited supply of ammunition and often heavily outnumbered. So, any open combat would favor the enemy. So local militaries

⁸ Asiatic Journal of 1828 details about the tactics used by Kurichiya and Nayar soldiers of Pazhassi Raja in war with British with special reference to how they ambushed an entire British column at Periya Pass in 1797. But note here that these are tactics were pretty much the same that they used previously when fighting Mysore army as attested by description by Lieutenant Colonel Mark Wilks in "Historical Sketches of South India" (1817)

spread themselves across their native country and instead engaged in constant hit and run attacks. Local troops like Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas would wait concealed in thick forests that lined both sides of roads and pathways used by enemy troops. They would shoot either arrows or bullets and then flee into woods. If the enemy troops chased them into woods, advantage goes to the local soldier. Neither artillery nor musket fire is of any use in hand-to-hand combat in forest. As a rule, local soldier was always superior to invader, whether Mysorean or British, when it was man to man combat.

Local soldiers like Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas always targeted the weakest link of invaders – their supply trains, baggage and depots. If enemy was on March, attack was done on lightly defended baggage train which carried food, ammunition and other supplies needed for war and then plundered. If enemy was camped, his depot was attacked and plundered of its food and weapons. Aim was to ensure that enemy loses his ability to wage war by loss of food – which will cause hunger – and loss of weapons - which will make him defenceless before enemy attacks. Preferred time of such plundering raids was mostly at night. Logic behind preference for night-time raid is that locals knew the terrain well and hence could run away after launch of surprise attack. Invaders unfamiliar with terrain will be hesitant to chase the attacker at night into the forests which may conceal enemy well prepared to strike.

Principle of using overwhelming force at weak point was used – this was the principle used at Periya in 1797. Logic behind this strategy is that if you do not have parity with enemy, then you should concentrate bulk of your force at a point and moment where enemy least expects a strike. Importance of this sort of attack is that it shocks the enemy and demoralizes him. Enemy is then forced to extra-cautious and this slows down his offensive operation.

Attack on enemy forces were launched during monsoons. During rains, enemy forces – which came from drier parts – whether Mysoreans or British or British Indian troops – are struck down by diseases like dysentery and malaria and makes them unfit for combat. This makes them easy target for local military-men like Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas who are not affected by rains. Also, during rains, use of firepower becomes difficult – whether artillery or firearms. Thus, local soldiery who uses swords, daggers, bows and machetes has an edge in monsoon war. Often large-scale attacks were launched on enemy forces during rainy seasons – on both Mysoreans as well as British.

Weapons of war used by Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas encompassed bow, musket and dagger. Bow and musket was used to strike enemy from distance. Dagger was used in hand-to-hand combat. Use of bow as a weapon of war was widespread among Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas primarily due to two reasons –

they traditionally were associated with archery and due to the fact that firearms and ammunition were often not plentifully available.

Conclusion

Generally, freedom struggle in Keralam is believed to begin on with British conquest of Keralam after 1792. But this is a wrong idea. First major invasion of Keralam and occupation of a large part of it by a foreign power was not done by British. Instead, it was by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan of Mysore.

Some may object calling Hyder and Tipu as foreigners – but from an emic perspective of Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas (as well as local of Malabar in general at that time), they were seen as rapacious invaders whose primary motive was to acquire more territory and more wealth in source of revenue and tributes.

Rather than limiting role of tribes like Kurichiyas and Mullukurumas in freedom struggle only to anti-British struggles, we must also take note of their role in resistance to earlier invaders like Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan.

Unfortunately, we still have no detailed accounts of role of tribes in resistance to Mysore rulers. This is unfortunate because war of resistance waged on Mysore rulers were longer than the one fought in opposition to English East India Company.

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