

Veerapandiya Kattabomman and the Poligar Resistance at Panchalankurichi in Kovilpatti Taluk: A Historical Study

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ABSTRACT

Panchalankurichi, one of the historic palayams (chieftaincies) situated within present-day Kovilpatti Taluk of Thoothukudi District, occupies a central place in the early history of anti-colonial resistance in South India. It was here that Veerapandiya Kattabomman, poligar of Panchalankurichi, organised a determined and ultimately unsuccessful stand against the revenue demands and political authority of the English East India Company between 1795 and 1799, nearly six decades before the wider uprising of 1857. This article traces the administrative background of the poligar system in the Tirunelveli-Thoothukudi region, the specific chain of events that led to armed conflict between Kattabomman and the Company's forces at Panchalankurichi, his capture and execution at Kayathar and the subsequent Second Poligar War of 1801. Drawing on available historical accounts, the article situates Panchalankurichi's resistance within the broader colonial and administrative history of Kovilpatti Taluk and assesses its long-term significance as an early episode of organised opposition to British rule in the Madras Presidency.

Keywords: Veerapandiya Kattabomman; Panchalankurichi; poligar system; palayakkarars; Kovilpatti Taluk; East India Company; Second Poligar War; Madras Presidency; anti-colonial resistance; Tirunelveli history..

INTRODUCTION

Kovilpatti Taluk in Thoothukudi District contains within its boundaries several sites of considerable historical importance, among which Panchalankurichi, located a short distance from Ottapidaram and within the taluk's jurisdiction, is the most significant for the political history of the region (Tuticorin Information, 2013). Panchalankurichi was traditionally counted among the seventy-two palayams (feudal chieftaincies) of the Madurai Nayak kingdom, a system of military governorships instituted from the time of the Vijayanagara Empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to administer the southern Tamil country (Byju's, 2022). The chieftains of Panchalankurichi took the title Kattabomman Nayaka and by tradition the palayam's name derives from the resistance once offered there by five Pandya chieftains or Pancha Pandyas, against the Madurai Nayaks in a nearby valley (Tuticorin Information, 2013).

It was the last independent ruler of this line, Veerapandiya Kattabomman, born on 3 January 1760 and enthroned as chieftain of Panchalankurichi on 2 February 1790, whose confrontation with the East India Company transformed a small palayam within Kovilpatti Taluk into one of the earliest and most celebrated sites of organised resistance to British colonial authority in India (Byju's, 2022; Testbook, 2024). The episode occupies an unusual place in Indian historical memory: on the one hand it is amongst the most widely commemorated events of pre-1857 resistance to colonial rule anywhere in South India, embedded deeply in Tamil popular culture, cinema and school curricula; on the other hand, the specific administrative and territorial context within which the episode unfolded namely, its location within what later became the taluk of Kovilpatti remains comparatively under-examined in dedicated historical scholarship, which tends instead to treat the episode primarily as a biographical study of Kattabomman himself rather than as a local and regional administrative history.

This article seeks to address that gap by situating the well-known narrative of Kattabomman's resistance within the specific historical geography and administrative structure of Kovilpatti Taluk. The discussion proceeds in the following order. Section 2 sets out the problem addressed by the study. Section 3 lists the specific objectives of the research. Section 4 reviews the available literature on the poligar system and the sequence of events leading to the confrontation between Kattabomman and the East India Company. Section 5 examines Panchalankurichi's position within the historical geography of Kovilpatti Taluk. Section 6 discusses the findings in light of the broader colonial administrative context. Section 7 considers the legacy and..

commemoration of the episode. Section 8 offers concluding remarks and suggests directions for further taluk-level historical research

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While Veerapandiya Kattabomman is widely commemorated in Tamil Nadu's popular memory and school history curricula, the specific administrative and territorial context of Panchalankurichi as a site located within what later became Kovilpatti Taluk is less often examined in detail. A taluk-focused historical study is therefore useful in situating this well-known episode of anti-colonial resistance within the local administrative geography of Thoothukudi District and in tracing how the poligar system, its taxation disputes with the Company and the subsequent wars of 1799 and 1801 shaped the political history of the taluk in which Panchalankurichi is located.

A related difficulty is that much of the existing popular literature on Kattabomman tends toward hagiography, presenting the resistance in primarily nationalist and moral terms without adequate attention to the specific administrative mechanics of the poligar system – the structure of revenue obligations, the position of the Nawab of Arcot as intermediary and the Company's own evolving policy toward the palayakkarars of the southern Tamil country – that together produced the conditions for confrontation. A taluk-level historical study, grounded in the available secondary literature, offers an opportunity to recover some of this administrative context while still doing justice to the episode's undeniable significance as an early instance of organised resistance to colonial authority.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To examine the poligar system of administration in the Tirunelveli-Thoothukudi region and the position of Panchalankurichi within it.

To trace the sequence of events leading to conflict between Veerapandiya Kattabomman and the East India Company between 1795 and 1799.

To study the capture, trial and execution of Kattabomman and the subsequent Second Poligar War of 1801.

To assess the historical significance of the Panchalankurichi resistance for the political history of Kovilpatti Taluk and of the wider Indian freedom movement.

To situate Panchalankurichi within the specific historical geography of Kovilpatti Taluk, in relation to neighbouring sites such as Ottapidaram, Ettayapuram and Kayathar.

To examine the patterns of commemoration through which the memory of the resistance has been sustained from the colonial period to the present day.

4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

4.1 The Poligar System in the Tirunelveli-Thoothukudi Region

Historical accounts describe the poligars (palayakkarars) as feudal military chiefs and administrative governors appointed under the Vijayanagara and subsequent Nayak systems to collect revenue and maintain local order in the southern Tamil country, a position that Kattabomman's ancestors had held at Panchalankurichi across several generations (Byju's, 2022). The poligar system, as it evolved across the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, combined military and civil functions: each palayakkarar was responsible not only for the collection of land revenue within his territory but also for the maintenance of a body of armed retainers, ostensibly for the defence of the wider Nayak or, later, Nawabi polity of which the palayam formed a part. This dual military-administrative character of the poligar office is essential to understanding why the confrontation between Kattabomman and the Company escalated so rapidly into open armed conflict rather than remaining a purely fiscal dispute: unlike an ordinary revenue defaulter, a poligar such as Kattabomman commanded an organised armed following and controlled a fortified settlement, resources that made a decisive military response, from the Company's perspective, appear unavoidable once negotiation had failed.

Following the transfer of tax-collection rights in the Carnatic to the East India Company by the Nawab of Arcot, who was indebted to the Company, most poligars in the region were compelled to pay tribute directly to Company officials; Kattabomman alone among the local chieftains persistently refused (Byju's, 2022; Art of History, 2007). This transfer of revenue rights forms a crucial link in the administrative history of the episode. It reflects the wider pattern by which the East India Company, over the second half of the eighteenth century, progressively converted its position from that of a commercial and military ally of regional Indian rulers into that of the effective sovereign revenue authority across large parts of southern India, often through precisely such transfers of fiscal rights by indebted or dependent local rulers rather than through direct conquest alone. The poligars of the Tirunelveli region, previously accustomed to a looser and more negotiable relationship with the distant Nawab of Arcot, found themselves instead confronted with a far more exacting and centralised revenue administration under the Company, a change in the nature of overlordship that several poligars besides Kattabomman found difficult to accept, even if Kattabomman's resistance proved the most sustained and best documented of these.

4.2 The Sequence of Confrontation, 1795–1799

Accounts of the dispute record that Tirunelveli Collector Jackson repeatedly summoned Kattabomman to explain his non-payment of tribute and that Kattabomman eventually agreed to meet the Collector at the Ramalinga Vilasam palace of the Sethupathi of Ramanathapuram, where the meeting broke down into a skirmish in which the Company's Deputy Commandant, Clarke, was killed (Art of History, 2007; Sadashree, 2024). The choice of the Ramalinga Vilasam palace as neutral ground, mediated through the Sethupathi of Ramanathapuram, itself indicates that both sides initially sought some form of negotiated resolution rather than immediate confrontation; the breakdown of this meeting into violence therefore marks a decisive turning point after which reconciliation between Kattabomman and the Company authorities became effectively impossible.

Kattabomman escaped from the scene and hostilities escalated over the following months, culminating in a Company assault on the Panchalankurichi fort in September 1799 under Major Bannerman, during which the fort held out for a day before falling, with the British officer Collins killed while attempting to breach the southern gate (Telibrary, 2025; Tamil Heritage, 2007). The fact that the fortified settlement of Panchalankurichi was able to resist a organised Company military assault for even a full day, inflicting casualties among the attacking force, testifies to the genuine military capacity that the poligar system had built up over generations, notwithstanding its comparatively small territorial base. This should caution against reading the episode purely as an unequal contest between an overwhelming colonial military machine and a hopelessly outmatched local chieftain; while the ultimate outcome was never seriously in doubt given the disparity in resources between the Company and any single palayam, the resistance offered at Panchalankurichi was, in immediate military terms, a genuine and costly challenge to Company forces.

Kattabomman escaped into the forests near Pudukkottai following the fall of the fort, but was subsequently handed over to the British by the ruler of Pudukkottai, a betrayal noted consistently across historical accounts of the episode (Byju's, 2022; Telibrary, 2025). This act of betrayal by a neighbouring ruler is frequently highlighted in popular retellings of the episode as emblematic of the fractured political solidarity among the region's ruling houses in the face of Company pressure, a theme to which this article returns in Section 6. After a summary trial in which he refused to submit to British authority, Kattabomman was publicly hanged at Kayathar on 16 October 1799 and his associate Subramania Pillai was executed and his head displayed at Panchalankurichi as a warning to other chieftains (Byju's, 2022; Scribd, 2010). The deliberate choice to display Subramania Pillai's head at Panchalankurichi itself, rather than at the site of his execution, was evidently intended by Company authorities as an unambiguous public warning to the remaining palayakkarars of the region against similar defiance, an instance of exemplary colonial punishment consistent with broader Company practice in dealing with rebellious or defiant local rulers during this period. The fort at Panchalankurichi was subsequently razed by Company forces (Scribd, 2010), a further act calculated to eliminate any remaining military or symbolic value the site might retain for future resistance.

4.3 The Second Poligar War, 1800–1801

A further uprising, known as the Second Poligar War, broke out in 1800-1801 under Kattabomman's brothers Oomaidurai and Sevathaiah, who briefly reoccupied and re fortified Panchalankurichi in alliance with the Marudu brothers of Sivaganga before this second rebellion, too, was suppressed (Byju's, 2022; Tuticorin Information, 2013). The Second Poligar War is of particular significance for a taluk-level historical study because it demonstrates that resistance centred on Panchalankurichi was not confined to Kattabomman's own lifetime or leadership, but persisted, in an organised military form, for a further two years after his execution. The alliance with the Marudu brothers of Sivaganga also indicates that the resistance, by this stage, had begun to draw in poligar networks beyond the immediate Tirunelveli region, suggesting the emergence of a broader, if ultimately unsuccessful, coalition of southern Tamil chieftains opposed to the consolidation of Company revenue authority across the region.

5. PANCHALANKURICHI WITHIN KOVILPATTI TALUK: HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY

Panchalankurichi is located approximately three kilometres from Ottapidaram and roughly fifteen kilometres south of Ettayapuram, within the present administrative limits of Thoothukudi District and lies within the historical and geographical orbit of Kovilpatti Taluk, of which it is often described as a part in regional historical writing (Tuticorin Information, 2013). The site's proximity to other locations associated with the resistance – Ottapidaram, birthplace of the later freedom fighter V. O. Chidambaram Pillai and Kayathar, the site of Kattabomman's execution – situates Kovilpatti Taluk and its immediate surroundings as a coherent geographical theatre of early anti-colonial activity in the Thoothukudi region (Temple Travel and Sport, 2008).

This clustering of historically significant sites within a comparatively small geographic radius is itself worthy of note. The proximity of Panchalankurichi to Ottapidaram in particular creates an interesting, if chronologically distant, link between the eighteenth-century poligar resistance associated with Kattabomman and the early-twentieth-century nationalist activity associated with V. O. Chidambaram Pillai, whose Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company venture and subsequent imprisonment mark him as a leading figure of the later nationalist movement in the same district. While the two episodes belong to entirely different historical periods and political contexts – one rooted in the localised fiscal-military politics of the

late-eighteenth-century poligar system, the other in the organised, ideologically articulated nationalism of the early twentieth century their geographic proximity within the same taluk area lends Kovilpatti Taluk and its immediate environs a cumulative significance as a site of sustained, if episodically expressed, resistance to colonial authority across more than a century.

A memorial fort was constructed by the Government of Tamil Nadu at Panchalankurichi in 1972 atop the remnants of the original structure, commemorating Kattabomman's resistance and continuing to draw visitors interested in this history (Tamil Nadu Tourism, n.d.; Scribd, 2010). The decision to reconstruct the fort nearly two centuries after its original destruction reflects the growing importance attached to sites of pre-1857 anti-colonial resistance within the historical and commemorative culture of post-independence Tamil Nadu, a theme discussed further in Section 7 below.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The historical record indicates that the resistance organised at Panchalankurichi was rooted in a specific dispute over revenue demands imposed by the East India Company following the transfer of tax-collecting rights from the Nawab of Arcot, rather than a broader ideological rebellion in the modern nationalist sense; nonetheless, later nationalist historiography has consistently presented Kattabomman's defiance as an early and symbolically important instance of Tamil resistance to British colonial authority, predating the 1857 uprising by nearly six decades (Byju's, 2022; Satyaagrah, n.d.). This distinction between the immediate fiscal-administrative origins of the conflict and its later ideological reinterpretation as an episode of proto-nationalist resistance is important for a properly historical, as opposed to purely commemorative, account of the episode. It does not diminish the genuine significance of Kattabomman's defiance to note that it arose, in the first instance, from a specific and localised dispute over revenue obligations rather than from an articulated political ideology of Indian independence, which had not yet taken coherent shape at the end of the eighteenth century.

The betrayal of Kattabomman by the ruler of Pudukkottai and the subsequent execution of his associates, reflects the fractured and uneven character of poligar solidarity in the face of Company pressure, a pattern that also appears in the Company's success in winning over the neighbouring Ettayapuram chieftain, Ettappa Naicker, against Kattabomman (Sadashree, 2024). This pattern of fragmented resistance among the poligars of the Tirunelveli region is consistent with the broader historical experience of Company expansion across southern India in the late eighteenth century, in which the Company's political and military success depended less on any single overwhelming military advantage than on its ability to exploit existing rivalries and divisions among regional rulers, securing the cooperation or neutrality of some local powers in order to isolate and defeat others. Ettappa Naicker's cooperation with the Company against a neighbouring poligar and the Raja of Pudukkottai's decision to hand Kattabomman over rather than shelter him, both illustrate how the fragmented and often mutually competitive character of the poligar system itself, quite apart from any disparity in military technology, contributed significantly to the Company's ultimate success in suppressing the resistance centred on Panchalankurichi.

The Second Poligar War of 1801, in which Kattabomman's brothers briefly regained control of Panchalankurichi, further indicates that resistance in this part of Thoothukudi District was neither a single event nor confined to one individual, but a sustained, if ultimately unsuccessful, local challenge to colonial revenue administration over several years. This finding is significant for a taluk-focused historical study because it suggests that the political history of Kovilpatti Taluk in this period should be understood not as a single dramatic episode but as an extended sequence of contestation, negotiation and periodic armed conflict between local poligar authority and an increasingly assertive colonial administration, a sequence that only concluded with the definitive suppression of the Second Poligar War and the subsequent, more thoroughgoing, dismantling of the poligar system across the wider region in the early nineteenth century.

7. LEGACY AND COMMEMORATION

The memory of Kattabomman's resistance at Panchalankurichi has been sustained through multiple forms of commemoration extending well beyond Kovilpatti Taluk itself. The Government of India issued a postage stamp in 1999 to mark the bicentenary of his execution and an Indian Naval Station bears the name INS Kattabomman in his honour (Scribd, 2010). Within Tamil popular culture, his life has been depicted in cinema, most notably in a widely watched historical film, which has done much to keep his story before successive generations even as formal historical study of the episode has remained comparatively limited (Byju's, 2022).

At the local level, the reconstructed fort at Panchalankurichi functions as a memorial and a modest pilgrimage site for visitors interested in the region's anti-colonial history, though observers have periodically noted that the site and the surrounding villages associated with the resistance Ottapidaram and Kayathar among them remain under-promoted relative to their historical significance (Temple Travel and Sport, 2008). This gap between the scale of Kattabomman's significance in national commemorative culture reflected in the naval station, the postage stamp and the enduring popularity of cinematic treatments of his life and the comparatively modest state of heritage infrastructure at the actual historical sites within Kovilpatti Taluk itself, is a recurring theme in commentary on the region's heritage management. It also underscores the value of taluk-focused historical scholarship of the kind attempted in this article, which by anchoring the national narrative firmly within its specific local administrative and geographical setting, may help to draw renewed attention to the

comparatively under-documented local historical infrastructure surrounding Panchalankurichi, Ottapidaram and Kayathar.

8. CONCLUSION

The events at Panchalankurichi between 1795 and 1801 constitute one of the earliest documented instances of organised armed resistance to East India Company rule in southern India and they remain a defining episode in the political history of Kovilpatti Taluk and Thoothukudi District more broadly. A taluk-level historical study of this episode helps to anchor the well-known narrative of Veerapandiya Kattabomman within its specific local administrative and geographical setting, showing how the poligar system, revenue disputes and inter-chieftain rivalries in this part of the erstwhile Tirunelveli region combined to produce a resistance movement whose memory continues to shape the historical identity of Kovilpatti Taluk today.

Further research into this episode would benefit from closer attention to surviving colonial administrative and military records concerning the Panchalankurichi campaign, comparative study of the poligar system across other palayams of the erstwhile Tirunelveli region and a more systematic examination of the ways in which local commemorative practice in and around Kovilpatti Taluk has evolved from the colonial period to the present. Such research would complement the largely biographical and nationalist-commemorative literature that currently dominates popular treatments of Kattabomman, situating his resistance more firmly within the administrative and regional history of the taluk in which it took place..

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