



## ETHNO HISTORY OF NERKATTANSEVAL OF SOUTHERN PANDYA COUNTRY

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Nerkattanseval *Palayam* is on the eastern side of the Western Ghats. Angry bear would play with deer, And so would venomous snake with peafowl, Tiger and cow would freely mix and frolic, In the rich land of Pulitthevan[1] These lines explain the peace, harmony and security that prevailed in the Nerkattanseval *Palayam* by describing the amicable relationship between bears and deers and cows and tigers residing there.

### Clan and Subdivisions

Pulithevan belonged to the *Maravan* clan. *Maravan*, the word came from *Veeran* a Tamil word meaning a brave man. Ancient Tamil literature, particularly the Sangam literature called the warriors, soldiers and holders of armed forces as *Maravans*. *Maravans* belonged, to the Dravidian race. Since the ancient time, the people belonging to the *Maravan* clan had been mostly living in the southern part of the Tamil Country.[2] In ancient time, the people, to whatever caste they belonged, were called *Maravans*, if they went to battle fields as warriors. But gradually the son of a *Maravan* was also called *Maravan* even if he had not participated in a war. Thus the title *Maravan* became a caste identity determined by birth.[3] In those days, because of their strength and braveness, *Maravans* were given the duty of *kaval* (security) on many occasions. They got their remuneration as kind and sometimes as land. Due to this arrangement, *Maravans* became a community richer than the common people in the society. Such brave men became chieftains in the late medieval times and early modern period.

Nicholas B. Dirks explains that, the three castes, *Maravan*, *Kalian* and *Ahambadiyan* belonged to a group or a clan called *Indira kulam*. As the three *kulams* were jointly called *mukkulam*, their people were called *mukkulathor*. The people of these three castes were collectively called *tevan*. In practice, *Maravans* kept the caste name *tevan*, *Kalians* kept the name *ambalakaran* and *Ahambadiyans* held the name *servaikaran*. [4] *Maravans* were given the *Palayams* during the rule of *Viswanatha Nayak*. The ancestors of *Pulithevan* got appointed as chieftains by a *Pandya* king before the advent of the *Nayaks*. The designation

*Palayakkarar* was given by the Nayaks but their occupation continued as it was given by the earlier rulers[5].

The people who were from Chola Nadu settled in Pandya Country particularly in the Ramnad area were called *Sembiyanattu* Maravans. S. Kathirvelu says that as legends, traditions and puranas mentioned, these people migrated from the Ramnad area to Tirunelveli region due to constant wars. Within the Maravan castes, there were subdivisions. They were *Sembinattu* Maravan, *Kondaiyankottai* Maravan, *Pandara* Maravan, *Aappanurnattu* Maravan, *Uppukottai* Maravan, *Servaikara* Maravan, *Vanniya* Maravan, *Karma* Maravan, *Akatha* Maravan and *Kurinji* Maravan.[6] *Maravar Charithiram* says that there were 18 subdivisions. But *Devaneyya Pavanar*, a Tamil poet and scholar insists that there were 38 divisions. So the exact number of subdivisions of Maravans cannot be fixed with certainty. Each section had many further branches. *Pulithevan* and his ancestors belonged to *Kondaiyankottai* Maravan sect. As it is relevant here, a detailed description of this sect is given below.

### **Ancestors**

There was a story about the *Kondaiyankottai* Maravans. Once upon a time, there was a war between *devas* (celestials) and *asuras* (demons). *Devas* won the war and cut the heads of all *asuras* and kept them at the entrance of the *kottai* (the fort). This *kottai* latter became the residing place of Maravans. The place where the *kottai* was located was called the *Kiluvai Nadu* (named after the *Kihivai* or *Commiphora* berryi, a tree variety) Ramnad country, and was divided into five *kottais*. They were *Sembinattu* *kottai*, *Kondaiyankottai*, *Karuthukkottai*, *Sekakkottai* and *Anilakkottai*. The Maravan of *Sembinattu* *kottai* remained at home and the others migrated to other parts of the region. The Maravans of *Kondaiyankottai* were the residents of *Kihivai Nadu* and they were found more in the army the *Sethupathy* of Ramnad. When there was a misunderstanding between the Pandya of Madurai and the *Sethupathy* of Ramnad, the Maravans migrated towards southern parts and settled in Tirunelveli.[7] These Maravans were called *tevar*, *talaivar*, *servaikarar*, *karaiyalar*, and *rayar*[8].

The Maravans who settled in Tirunelveli region were all from the *Sethunadu* (Ramnad). Among them, *Vadakarai Chinnanathevan* alone belonged to the sect of *Uppukottai* Maravan. *Chokkampatti Periyasamithevan*, *Surandai Marathappathevan*, *Singampatti Nallakuttithevan*, *Urkad Sethuramaththevan*, *Nerkattanseval Pulithevan*, *Kurukkal Patti Arukaththevan*, *Kodikulam Moovariyan*, *Kadampur Thadiyathevan*, *Maniachi Indira Thalaivan* and *Naduvakurichi Talaivan* all belonged to the sect of *Kondaiyankottai* Maravan[9].

Since the Maravans were appointed as soldiers under the Pandya kings, hero stones were erected in the memory of their brave deeds in battles. The ten hero stones, found in *Ilavelankal* at *Kayathar* taluk in *Tuticorin* district belonged to the later Pandya period c. 1547 A.D. These hero stones were erected for the ten soldiers belonging to the *Kondaiyankottai* Maravan sect, who fought for the Pandya king against the Nayak soldiers and died in the battle. The forces under Tirunelveli *Perumal* alias *Vettum Perumal* on the side of the Pandya king met *Venkalarasan*, the head of the *Tottiyar's* force (Nayak) in *Ilavelankal* [10]. The later Pandyas are called *Tirunelveli Pandya* and *Tenkasi Pandya* by the historians. *Sree Vallaban* (1534 - 43) was one among the later Pandyas and he was succeeded by *Parakirama Pandyakula Sekharan*. In the battle between *Venkalarasan* and *Vettum Perumal*, the former led the *Tottiyar* force and the latter led the Maravans force. *Venkalarasan* might be the commander of troops of *Madurai Nayak* [11]. The ten *Kondaiyankottai* Maravans were killed in the battle and ten hero stones were erected in their memory.

### **Sects**

The *Kondaiyankottai* sect were subdivided into six endogamous *kothus*, or "trees" (they are named after trees), each *kothu* being again split up into three exogamous sects, or

*kilais*. The names of the *kothus* were: - *Vettilai* (betel-vine), *Milagu* (pepper-vine), *Kamugu* (areca), *Icham* (dates), *Thennai* (cocoanut) and *Panai* (palmyra). The *kilais* were the names of persons, as was the case with *gotrams* among the brahmans. A point of difference, however, between the Maravan *kilai* and the Brahman *gotram* was that the children of the former inherited the *kilai* not of their father but of their mother. The rule forbidding members of the same *kilai* to marry one another was strictly followed but the rule that prohibited the members of one *kothu* from marrying into another *kothu* was frequently ignored. A visitor in search of hospitality in a strange village would always ask for a household belonging to his own *kilai*[12].

### Migration

Burton Stein says that, in the Tamil Country, the Maravans belonged to the Ramnad region, in the southern part of the Pudukottai state, and in the western part of the Tirunelveli region near the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent. The Maravans seemed to have migrated most probably from the Ramnad area[13] and they settled in the fertile red soil areas along the foothills of the Western Ghats, although they were from a dry area.[14]. The migration and settlement of the Maravans were found to be earlier than the Tottiyans and the family histories of the Maravans began with their association with Pandya kings before the Nayak and Vijayanagar rulers. In A.D. 1300, the Pandyas succeeded the Cholas as a great dynasty of the Tamil country and due to the political pressures from the northern side, the Pandyas moved from Madurai towards the south, the Tenkasi region in western Tirunelveli during the fourteenth century. They remained there for a couple of centuries until they were defeated or displaced by the Nayak rule that was spreading across the southern region during the sixteenth century.[15]

The Maravans had a traditional bond with Kallans and Ahambadiyans. These groups being fierce and possessing great military prowess were later considered criminal sects. The Maravans were considered both as fierce warriors and merciless robbers in the ancient period. The early occupation of the Maravan was the *kudikaval*, or 'village watch', which the community had enjoyed for centuries. Though this community was involved in robbery and plunder, they were appointed as *kavalkarans*. The reason being "Set a thief to catch a thief was a principle which naturally appealed to a primitive society.[16] The Maravans' dominance was over areas that were productively and culturally inferior to those of Vellalans the highest of the non-Brahman castes typically associated with settled agriculture in the river and deltaic areas.[17]

According to Dirks, "the reputation of the Maravans as fierce warriors, albeit combined with what in their localities were prestigious positions as local chiefs and protectors, did set them apart from more peaceful and sedentary cultivating groups who had more direct relations with the kings of the great south Indian dynasties and with royally endowed institutions, such as temples and Brahman settlements (brahmateyam)."[18] Within the Maravans sub castes, Kondaiyankottai Maravans were second in importance while Sembunattu Maravans group was in the first, to which belonged the Rajas of Ramnad and Sivagangai.[19] But in the Tirunelveli region the Kondaiyankottai group was the most dominant group of Maravans.

### Settlement area

According to David Ludden, the Maravans settled in the areas that were unoccupied by the earlier settlers like Vellalans, Brahmans etc. and importantly they maintained their dominance over the areas where they settled.[20] The area between Rajapalayam in the north and Chittar River in the South where the Maravans were settled was covered by Sivagiri and Seithur in the north on the border between Tirunelveli and Madurai region, and Kalakkad and Valliyur in the South, only 25 miles north of the Indian Ocean.[21] The areas of Maravan settlement were partially irrigated by small rivers, often non perennial and by rain-fed tanks.

They settled in groups that were headed by a chieftain or headman and attained local dominance.

On the eastern side of Tamirabarani River, at the foot hill of the Western Ghats the people belonging to the Maravan caste had settled down.[22] Some of the places in Tirunelveli region, like Uthumalai, Surandai, Nerkattanseval, Vadakarai, Maniachi, Talaivankottai, Naduvakurichi, Kurukkalpatti, Kadampur, Palavanatham, Palayampatti, Chokkampatti, Urkad, Kollamkondan, Seithur, Sivagiri, etc., were the *Palayams* held by the Maravan caste during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The reason for their holding the *Palayam* was that they had the rights of *kaval* due to their fearless nature and crude and rude character.[23] Nerkattanseval is one among the places in the Southern Tamil Country where Maravans settled.

The Kondaiyankottai Maravans settled in *Puzhi Nadu* situated in the western part of the Tirunelveli region. The place located between Pandya Nadu and Chera Nadu (on the slopes of the Western Ghats in the Tamil Country) was called *Puzhi Nadu*. *Puzhi* means dust. Chera, Chola and Pandya were fighting each other to capture this fertile land. Because of this continues wars, this place was always filled with dust. That is why this place was called *Puzhi Nadu*. The people lived in Pandya Nadu were called Pandyas, in Chera Nadu, Cheras, in Chola Nadu, Cholas. Similarly people lived in *Puzhi Nadu* were called *Puzhias*. The Maravans ruled this place. The head of the Maravans was called Puzhithevan meaning one who rules the land of *Puzhi*. Misspelled as Puulithevan, it later became Pulithevan.[24]

### **Nerkattanseval**

Nerkattanseval is situated in Sankarankoil taluk of Tenkasi region, and 10 km away from Sankarankoil. Nerkattanseval, a place of full of trees and shrubs and safe from all kinds of danger,[25] situated in a central place surrounded by *Panchatalas* five sacred places. They are Devadanam is for sky, Sankarankoil is for soil, Thargapuram is for water, Thenmalai is for air, Karivalamvanthanallur is for fire. These make the *Palayam* as special one. The *Palayam* was famous for banana, sugarcane, turmeric, ginger, coconut tree, and jack tree.[26] Historians have used the name of the places interchangeably. This place was good for paddy cultivation because of this reason it was called Nerkattanseval. (*nel* means paddy) This is a place where paddy was cultivated in plenty. Pulithevan never paid a single *paise* or a single measure of paddy as tribute or tax to anybody even to the Nawab and the Company. Because of his refusal this place was called Nerkattanseval or the land of the one who never paid paddy (now it is called Nerkattumsevval). The Kondaiyankottai Maravan's early settlement was in Avudaiyapuram, near Nerkattanseval.[27] Avudaiyapuram was one of the ancient *Palayams* of the Tirunelveli region. During the period of Nagama Nayak and Viswanatha Nayak this *Palayam* got its importance in the political scene of the Southern Tamil Country once again.[28] The ancestors of Pulithevan, in those days, built a new fort at Avudaiyapuram and ruled it.

Pulithevan built a fort at Nerkattanseval and shifted his residence to the new fort which was called *Pudukottai* (New fort). Folk stories talk more about this fort.[29] Avudaiyapuram was surrounded by a thick jungle. The Arunthathiyar (Chakkilyas) or pagadai) cleaned the forest and cultivated this land and converted into a paddy field. Irulappa Pillay, belonging to a dominant caste, illegally took the field from the Arunthathiyar. The latter went and made a complaint to Pulithevan who got the field back from Irulappa Pillay and restored it to the Arunthathiyar. In that place, he was surprised to see a rabbit chasing a dog. After seeing this he thought that the secret of the bravery of the rabbit was due to the place and constructed a fort there. The place was called Nerkattanseval which became Pulithevan's capital. Avudaiyapuram *Palayam* became Nerkattanseval *Palayam*.[30]

The *Palayam* was again renamed Avudaiyapuram in the permanent land revenue settlement, after the British suppressed the revolt of the *Palayakkarar* in 1767. In

Mackenzie's Collections the *Palayam* is mentioned as Avudaiyapuram not as Nerkattanseval.[31] The Company officially adopted for Permanent settlement the name Avudaiyapuram, perhaps because the associations of the name Nerkattanseval were too unpleasant. The name of Panjalankurichi was expunged from all official records for a similar reason.[32]

### Power and Legitimacy

Oral sources narrate the story of how Pulithevan's ancestors got the *Palayam*. there was a hill named *Nagamalai* situated on the western side of Madurai at a distance of 2 km. One sixteen feet *Vengai puli* (tiger) disturbed the people of *Nagamalai*. Varakuna Sindhamani the Pandiyan ruler of Madurai announced that a prize for the person who would be able to control this tiger. Nobody could achieve the task. During this time an ancestor of Pulithevan went to meet the Pandiyan king to get back the right of *kaval* in Avudaiyapuram. Now the king asked the man who belonged to Avudaiyapuram to face the tiger. If the tiger would be killed, the king promised the latter the right of *kaval*. The man went inside the cave of the *Nagamalai*, fought with tiger and killed it finally.[33]

Pandiyan was happy on this and as he promised earlier, the man was given prizes and the title 'Varakuna Sindhamani Pulithevan'. He was given the *pattu peedambaram* (gold cloth and silk garments), and was carried in the king's *pallakku* (palanquin).[34] He was taken in a procession in the streets of Madurai where he worshipped Chokkanatha (Meenakshi is not mentioned here). A fish flag, green umbrella, a fan made of cowry and a white staff were presented to him. Avudaiyapuram was given back to him and also he was given the duty of *bandhobast* (protection) of the places belonging to Chera's. Varakuna Sindhamani Pulithevan ruled 46 years.[35] He was succeeded by his son Vadukkathan Pulithevan during whose period, Pandiyan rule declined. Nagama Nayak came to power. The latter asked the former that, how he behaved to Pandiyan and he was continued so. Viswanatha Nayak, son of Nagama Nayak came to power; he also asked Vadakkathan Pulithevan to continue and asked to obey as he did to his father. Vadakkathan Pulithevan ruled 34 years. The generations continue their rule and Pulithevan came as 10<sup>th</sup> *Palayakkarar*. He was named Kaththappa Pulithevan III. But he was called by the people as Pulithevan.[36]

In 1301, Malik kafur occupied Madurai. From 1323 to 1334 Madurai was ruled by the Delhi Sultans and from 1334 to 1378 Madurai was under the control of Madurai Sultan appointed by the Delhi Sultans. During the Muhamadan rule, the power of this *kaval area* was reduced. The Muhamadans plundered the temple and murdered the people. These actions paved the way to lose the power and status of *kaval area*. [37] Although Madurai was under Muhamadans, the Pandiyans did not loose their power. They dominated and ruled Madurai, Ramnad and Tirunelveli areas. Such Pandiyans were Maravarman Kulasekara Pandiyan (1317 - 1346), Sadaiyvarman Parakirama Pandyan (1315- 1349), Maravarman Veera Pandiyan (1340-1380), Maravarman Parakirama Pandiyan (1335 - 1352) are some of them to mention.[38] There was no (one) Pandiyan ruler in the name of Varakunarama Sindhamani Pandiyan. It is for note. Kumara Kambanan in 1375 invaded Madurai. He defeated the Muhamadans and their rule. He appointed some persons who had lineage in Pandiyans' generation to help the administration and to safeguard the sacred places, endowment places. Varakunarama Sindhamani Pandiyan might be one among them. During his rule, the Pulithevan's ancestors might get back their *Palayam* (Avudaiyapuram *Palayam*)[39].

During the rule of Varakunarama Sindhamani Pandiyan from 1378, the forefathers of Pulithevan ruled the *Palayam*. The genealogy is constructed in Mackenzie manuscripts as follows:

Varakuna Sindhamani Pulithevan 1378 - 1424	-46 years
Vadakkathan Pulithevan 1424 -1458	- 34 years
Varakuna Sindhamani Vadakkathan Pulithevan 1513 - 1548 -	35 years

Samasathithevan (1548-1572)	-	24 years
Kathappathevan (1572- 1600)		-28 years
Kathappa Pulithevan I (1600-1610)	-	10 years
Sithiraputhirathevan (1610-1638)	-	28 years
Kathappa Pulithevan II (1638 - 1663)	-	25 years
Sithiraputhira Thevan (1663 — 1726)	-	63 years
Kathappa Pulithevan III (1726 - 1767)	-	42 years[40]

The present research deals with the last of this line, Kathappa Pulithevan III. The following lines explain about the birth of Pulithevan. (see appendix 1)

In the year one thousand seven hundred and fifteen

On the sixteenth day of *Avani*, on a Thursday

Under the star *utliratam*, in *cimma laknam*

At an auspicious time on an auspicious day was born Puli.[41]

Pulithevan's parents donated many things to the people on the occasion of Pulithevan's birth. *Kothanam* (gift of cows), *Poothanam* (gift of flowers). *Vasthirathanam* (gift of cloths), special *pooja* and celebration in the temples were conducted.[42]

Pulithevan was the tenth *Palayakkarar* of Nerkattanseval and lived during the eighteenth century. He was a political diplomat and a brave warrior.[43] Even as a young man he was given an education meant for men of the high caste. He was trained in *veera vilayattu* (martial arts). He learnt properly *yanayetram* (elephant riding), *kuthiraiyetram* (horse riding), *malyutham* (wrestling), *valveechu* (fencing), *silambam* and *valarithadi* (traditional martial arts of the southern Tamil region) etc.[44]

### Overview

The people who migrated from Ramnad settled in Tinnevely were called Kondaiyankottai Maravans to which Pulithevan and his ancestors belonged to. And they got *kaval* rights from Pandiyans before Nayakans. Avudaiyapuram was one among the seventy two *Palayams*. The capital was shifted to Nerkattanseval which became more famous than Avudaiyapuram during Pulithevan's period. *Vamsavazhi* of Avudaiyapuram got the *Palayam* rights from Nayaks. Pulithevan was a brave man who resisted Heron's expedition, fought the battles of Kalakkad, Srivilliputhur, Tirunelveli, Gangaikondan, Nerkattanseval, Vasudevanallur. etc. The people who migrated from Andhra and settled in Southern Tamil Country were Tottiyans or Kambalathans. Kattabomman and his ancestors belonged to Thokkalavar section of Tottiyans. They got *kaval* duties from Nayakans under the Ettaiyapuram *Palayam*. When the occasion came, the Ketty Bommu dynasty used such an opportunity. The principle centre of the *Palayam* was Panjalankurichi. Kattabomman got support from other Tottiyans *Palayams* and led a confederacy against the domination and ascendancy of the Company. Further he resisted the Company's authority in the late eighteenth century. Although Pulithevan and Kattabomman were from two different castes, different regions, and different periods as well, they were designated as *Palayakkarars* and were bestowed the same power and authority over their *Palayams*. After the decline of the Nayaks how they emerged as independent chieftains and why they were designated as little kingdoms and how the domain formation took place in the region are important questions to be answered in the next chapter.

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