

The Background of The Nayakkars of Kandy

THE kings who ruled the Kandyan Kingdom from 1739 to 1815 are often called Nāyakkārs. This is because of their associations with the Nāyaks of South India. And these kings themselves were conscious of this and since it was no advantage, did their best to behave like the former Sinhalese kings, adopting their names, language and religion. Their queens also followed the same policy and says the Cūlavamsa author,¹ “The mahesis of the king too gave up false faith to which they had been long attached, and adopted in the best manner possible the true faith which confer immortality.”

The period covered by their rule was a very important period in the history of Ceylon. It saw the end of Dutch rule in the maritime provinces (1796) and its supersession by the rule of the British and also the end of Sinhalese sovereignty which had been fighting for a long time a losing battle for survival. The Nāyakkār kings of Kandy also had a part to play in the driving away of the Dutch and the coming of the British, as well as in the disappearance of the independence of the Kandyan kingdom itself. And all these events were closely connected with their origins in India. The intimate connections the Nāyaks of S. India had with the British in India helped them to obtain their help against the Dutch in Ceylon. And the fact that the Nāyakkārs were South Indians by origin led to their being looked upon with disfavour by the Kandyan chiefs and the people ; and they were often spoken of as “Vadugas”² in the sense of “foreigners” or “Northerners”.

It is, however, interesting to note that inspite of this importance of their origin so far it has received no serious attention, and authors have always been content to call them as being of Madura or Tanjore Nāyak origin, or in a still more general sense as being of Malabar origin. The Pali Chronicles as well as Dutch documents have left us considerable information which could indicate from where the Nāyakkārs came to Kandy, and this is to a great extent confirmed by a few Tamil and English writings. The Dutch writers, in particular, would have known their original place, because it was in their ships that sometimes princesses were brought to Ceylon.

1. *Cūlavamsa*, II, Chapter 98, v. 6—7.

2. Wadagai—a caste in South India.

Father S. G. Perera says³ that it was Senarat (1605—1635), the successor of Vimaladharmasuriya, who revived the long-abandoned practice of procuring Indian queens for the Sinhalese kings. But the available information on this subject throws considerable doubt as to the validity of this statement. According to the *Cūlavamsa*⁴ the first king to do so was Rajasingha II (1635—1687) who “brought king’s daughters hither from the town of Madhurā.” Rajasingha II was the son and successor of Senarat. There are two other independent works which ascribe this innovation to Vira Narendra Sinha (1706—1739) the last Sinhalese king of Kandy. They are the Memoirs of the Dutch Governor, Jan Schreuder⁵ (1757—1762) and “Mirtanjaya” a Tamil MSS⁶. According to the former, “This Virapparakrama Narendra Singa was the first king who was related to the Malabar nation by his marriage with a princess of the opposite coast who was a daughter of one Pitti Nayaker of the Badegas caste.”⁷ The other, however, does not give the name of the king so explicitly as above, but from the account it could also be placed in the time of the same king of Kandy, as the Nāyakkār to whom he sent for a princess was Vijaya Ranga Chokkanatha Nāyakkār of Madura (1706—1732).

The author of *Cūlavamsa* would have had access to local sources which had recorded the past events, and hence was more reliable than what Schreuder had to say. Paul E. Peiris who has based his “Ceylon and the Hollanders”⁸ on much of Dutch information also refers to the queen of Rajasinha II who was a “member of the royal family of Madura,” and it may be suggested that this practice of bringing princesses from South India was there at least from about the time of Rajasinha II.

The question as to from whence they came, we have to depend on more or less the same sources. But there seem to have been a little confusion as to whether they came from the western or the eastern coast of South India, with the Dutch⁹ and the British¹⁰ calling them Malabars in a general sense, while the Sinhalese also called after them the street or suburb which they resided in as “Malabar Veediya.” They were called Malabars probably because it was thought that they came from the Malabar

3. A History for Schools, Pt. I, p. 133.

4. *Cūlavamsa*, II, Chapter 96, v. 60.

5. Memoir of Jan Schreuder, Tr. Reimers.

6. Oriental Historical MSS II, Taylor (1835) (O. H. MSS) Appendix G, p. 43—47.

7. Schreuder, p. 30.

8. P. 3.

9. Schreuder, p. 28, “We might add to this that the Court through the intermeddling of the Nayakkars (a kind of Malabar court nobility, to which the crown of Kandy has now for some years been allied by marriage).”

10. Colvin R. de Silva, Ceylon under the British I, p. 148.

coast, but a glance at a map of South India will show that Malabar coast is on the western side, while the majority of the available sources trace their origin to Madura and Tanjore and to the eastern coast which forms the Coromendal coast, and was closer to the ports of the eastern coast of Ceylon through which the Kandyan kings had all their dealings with India.

The available Pali, Tamil, Dutch and British sources, all trace the origins of Nāyakkārs of Kandy to the eastern half of South India. Some only to the Coromendal coast, while others go as far as Madura and Tanjore. According to the *Cūlavamsa*¹¹, Rajasinha II and his successors brought princesses from Madura and made them their first mahesis. The author of *Cūlavamsa* calls these maidens “king’s daughters” and “daughters of first mahesis” of Madura. The Tamil MSS “Mirtanjaya”¹² also says that Ceylon kings sent for brides to the Nāyaks of Madura or Tiru-sirapuram (Trichinopoly), and once the Nayaks were deprived of their traditional possessions by the Muslims and the English and made their way to the Coromendal coast, they continued to provide brides for the Kandyan kings, who by which time were Nāyaks themselves. And this same MSS says¹³ that Kirti Sri Maha Raja, one of the Nāyakkār kings of Kandy, got down some dispossessed Nayaks of Tanjore, also living on the Coromendal coast. This is confirmed by the Tanjore Manual¹⁴ which says that “the king of Kandy sent for some of the descendants of Vijaya Raghava and gave them fiefs in Ceylon, marrying them to his relatives.”

The Dutch Governor, Imhoff (1726—1740)¹⁵ in his Memoir to his successor draws attention to the negotiations for a marriage of the new king (Vijaya Raja Sinha 1739—1747) which have been carried on for some time with a high family on the opposite coast, of the Soerianse or so-called Sun-caste living at Konge Kondain, not far from Atour.”^{15a} Atour which is referred to here has not been identified and the only place on the coast of Coromendal which comes any closer to it is Adriam-patnam not very far from both Trichinopoly and Tanjore. Schreuder¹⁶ also refers only to the opposite coast, but makes no mention of any definite place. This reference to the opposite coast may be because of the fact that the Nāyaks by this time had moved to the coast.

11. *Cūlavamsa*, II, 96.60, 97.2, 97.23-24, 98.1-4.

12. P. 47—49.

13. P. 49.

14. Tanjore Manual (1883), p. 758.

15. Memoir of Governor Imhoff, Tr. Reimers, p. 14

15a. Atour, place in Salem but right in the interior and far north of both Madura and Tanjore.

16. Schreuder, p. 30.

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Pybus¹⁷ the Englishman who visited Kandy in 1762 was also acquainted with "the custom" among them (i.e. the kings) to have their wives from some part of the coast of Coromendal, and of Gentoo (Hindu) caste who are brought from Madura, Tanjore or Mysore countries." The king who occupied the throne at the time according to him was from the Madura country.

There is thus a great degree of agreement as to from whence came the Nāyakkārs of Kandy. Originally they came from Madura, and after its occupation by Muslims, they were residing on the Coromendal coast and from there continued to send brides to Kandy.

These people of South Indian stock who provided brides and successors to the kings of Kandy are often considered as of Nāyak origin. The Nāyaks were the Viceroyalty who were placed in charge of the distant provinces of the Vijayanagara Empire. There were a number of these viceroys, the most important of them being at Madura, Trichinopoly and Tanjore. After the decline of the Vijayanagara Empire in the 17th Century and its authority over the outlying areas fell off, and the furthest provinces like Madura and Tanjore asserted their independence, the Nāyaks themselves assuming the authority of kings.

The Cūlavamsa¹⁸ calls these brides who came from Madura as "king's daughters" and "daughters of first mahesis," but according to other authorities, it does not seem to have been necessarily so, at least till the termination of the Nāyak rule in Madura and Tanjore; and as Paul E. Peiris¹⁹ says they could have been the daughters of Polygars or noblemen who may have claimed kinship with the ruling Nāyak families.

The ruling Nāyaks as well as Hindus of the South, due to increasing Muslim inroads had become extremely conservative in the matter of religion and social institutions, and hence do not seem to have looked with favour on proposals of matrimony from the Sinhalese Buddhist kings of Kandy. In fact when Vira Narendra Sinha, the last Sinhalese king of Kandy asked for the hand of a daughter of Vijaya Ranga Chokkanatha (1706—1732) the last Nāyak of Madura, the latter seems to have been "horrified at what he considered to be the audacity of the Ceylon king, because of his inferior caste, and had dismissed the Ceylonese with scant courtesy."²⁰ And in "Mirtanjaya"²¹ this whole episode is given in graphic detail,

17. Pybus' Mission to Kandy in 1762, p. 25; (18) Cūlavamsa, II, 96.90, 97.2.

19. Ceylon and the Hollanders, p. 64.

20. Sathianatha Aiyer, Nayaks of Madura, p. 230

21. O. H. MSS, II, App. G., p. 47.

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while it also recalls the time when a similar request from Vijaya the first king of Ceylon, to the Pandian king was refused, but he was "supplied surreptitiously with a wife by a subject of the latter king who gave one of his own daughters."²² In a similar manner, according to the same authority,²³ Narendra Sinha, also obtained a daughter from a "very poor person in the country, of our religion (i.e. Hindu), who went with the Kandi people and lived there."

After the death of Narendra Sinha, a brother of his Madura wife succeeded to the throne under the name of Sri Vijaya Raja Sinha (1739—1747). He also sent for a bride from Madura, but in spite of his being a son of a "very poor person" he was more fortunate. This may be because he was of Indian origin, while his predecessor was Sinhalese and Buddhist.

At the time he sent for a bride, according to "Mirtanjaya,"²⁴ "King Vijaya Ranga Chokkanathan was deceased . . . and as the king Bangaru Tirumali Naicker had been driven away, and was come to reside at Vellecurachi, his relatives and dependents had left him, and were dispersed, and one of these reflected 'as the king of Kandi who has sent these messengers, is of our religious persuasion, it may be permitted us to give him a wife, accordingly he went and gave the king a wife.'" Thus when in their state of destitution they gave a daughter of their's to the King of Kandy, and with her came the entire family, one of her brothers succeeding to the throne at her husband's death. This was Kirti Sri Rajasinha, and it may be correct to say that the real Nāyakkār rule started with him. Kirti Sri in turn married "two daughters of Vijaya Manan Naicker, the grandson of a former king of Tanjore named Raja Vijaya Ragheva Naicker."²⁵

Certain aspects of general interest regarding the Nāyaks who arrived in Kandy were their state of utter destitution and their failure to produce children by their wives of Indian origin. Whenever a request for a bride was sent, it proved a great blessing to some of the exiled Nāyak families. Posthaste they came, with all their kith and kin, and in time to come there grew up in Kandy a strong faction of Nāyak extraction, residing in a separate suburb, some of them occupying important offices in the realm, while others like Narenappa Nāyak, father of Kirti Sri, engaged in maritime trade between India and Ceylon.

22. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 183.

23. O. H. MSS., II, p. 47.

24. O. H. MSS., II, p. 49.

25. Ibid.,

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The failure of the Nāyakkār rulers of Kandy to produce children by their Indian wives was conspicuous of their rule here, but their attempts in this direction were more successful with their Sinhalese wives ; The children by the latter, however, were not considered for the throne and it always passed to the brothers of their Indian brides.

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