

Origins of Kandyan kingdom's Nayaka kings

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The last independent king of Sri Lanka was from the Kandyan Nayaka dynasty. The study of the Kandyan Nayaka dynasty has evoked interest among historians and only a few of them have ventured to write its origins in detail.

Any historian writing about the Kandyan Nayaka kings must extend his range to include the Nayaka kings of Vijayanagar Empire and later age Nayaka kings of Madurai in South India. In fact it should begin with the invasion of India by the Muslim sultans of Turkish origin from Samarkand of Central Asia.

In the beginning of the 12th century AD, the invaders came through the Khyber Pass in the Hindu Kush mountain range and tried to penetrate deep into India. At the beginning, they were not successful. They could conquer only a small part of North India. Before the 7th century AD, Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan and parts of Central Asia were either Hindu or Buddhist states.

The task of conquering India was left to sultan Alauddin Khilji (1296-1316). He always enthused his soldiers with religious spirit and made them realise that war was a religious war (Jihad). They were fighting the war for the sake of God. Unfortunately, the native kings could not inspire their soldiers on those lines because their religions disapproved war and bloodshed. They only wanted peace and to live in harmony. However, the invaders were never hesitant to fight a war and they were prepared to die for their faith and for the wealth they could plunder in the event of a victory.

Hindu captive

After conquering North India, Alauddin Khilji set his eyes on South India. To subdue the southern kings, he sent one of his commanders Malik Kafur with a large military force. Malik was a Hindu captive from Gujarat who later converted to Islam and rose up in the military ranks to be-

come a commander. He came up to Rameshwaram in Tamil Nadu and on his way back ransacked the famous Meenakshi temple in Madurai and Sri Rangam temple in Trichy. Fortunately, Malik did not have a naval force at his disposal. Otherwise he would have invaded even Sri Lanka.

The invaders knew that in the South there was a lot of wealth which they could plunder if they emerged victorious. Therefore, they put their heart and soul in the war and made it a point to win it. However, the powerful sultanate became weak because of internal rifts.

Southern states took the first opportunity of throwing away the yoke of the sultanate. The world renowned historian Will Durant describes the condition of India under the invaders. He said, "In world history the worst crimes committed against humanity were committed under the sultans in their conquered territories in the Indian subcontinent."

Temples were looted and razed to the ground. Women were raped, abducted and sold off at the slave markets in Central Asia; prisoners were skinned alive; cities and villages were ransacked and burnt; men, women and children were massacred. One could not come to believe that human beings could commit such horrendous crimes.

There were many social effects of the invasion including religious converts, rape victims, and children born out of wedlock. Many families were left without their breadwinners. There was also a fear that invaders would take away unmarried girls. As a result, parents gave their daughters in marriage at a very young age.

In the chaotic and horrible situation, an important kingdom rose, grew and later expanded into an empire in the south. It was named the Vijayanagar Empire. It was founded by two brothers, Hari Hara and Bukka who were encouraged and guided by Vidyatirtha, the chief pontiff of the Sringeri Saiva Mutt on the banks of the Thunga Bhadra River.

The kingdom was mainly established to resist the inroads being made by the sultans into South India. The kings of Vijayanagar Empire started



King Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe

consolidating and brought large parts of South India under their control. Madurai which was earlier occupied by the sultans for a short period was finally swept away by Kumara Kampana, the son of Bukka in the 3rd quarter of the 14th century.

His wife Ganga Devi vividly described her valiant husband's expedition to Madurai in a poetic work. The exploits of Kumara Kampana are graphically, though somewhat romantically, have been described by Ganga Devi in her celebrated work "Madura Vijayam."

Thus Madurai, Tanjore and most parts of Tamil Nadu came under the

rule of Vijayanagar which foiled every enemy attempt. During their rule, Indian culture and civilisation reached new heights. The most famous ruler of Vijayanagar Empire was Krishna Devaraya I who ruled for about 25 years. He was one of the greatest rulers of South India.

He had a queen from Sri Lanka. However, after his death, the empire started declining and in 1560, northern Muslim kingdoms forgot their differences and turned against Vijayanagar Empire. The Hindu kingdom of the south collapsed and was languishing till Satrapathi Sivaji, the Maratha king and warrior came into the scene

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in the 16th century.

A British historian said, "Never perhaps in the history of the world had such havoc been wrought and wrought so suddenly on so splendid a city teeming with a wealthy and industrious population in the full plenitude of prosperity one day and on the next day seized, pillaged and reduced to ruins amid scenes of savage massacres and horrors beggaring description." After the war there was no powerful ruler in Vijayanagar who could check the decline. Thus the Vijayanagar Empire which was once glorious and powerful ended unceremoniously.

Warrior queen

After the war Madurai Nayaka Governor declared independence. Thirumalai Nayakar was a famous Nayaka ruler. Rani Mangamma ruled in the latter part of the 17th century. She was a warrior queen who fought many battles against invaders. Towards the end of the century, Madurai came under Maratha rule until the British brought it under their rule.

The Nayaka kings of Kandy were the descendants of the Madurai Nayaka royal families. In a way, they were also inheritors of the great Nayaka heritage of the Vijayanagar Empire. From the time of Prince Vijaya, Lank-

an kings had matrimonial relations with India, especially with Madurai royal families.

Thus Madurai had important historical connections with Sinhala royal families of Lanka. Matrimonial alliances between Sinhala royalty and South Indian royal families had been common throughout the history. Kandyan kings continued with the tradition. The Nayakars of Madurai were hardly aliens. Apart from matrimonial relationships, there were instances where they had provided military support in times of crisis. The soldiers sent by Nayakars of Madurai were highly rated by the Portuguese as excellent fighters. They played an important role in defending the Kandyan kingdom.

Kandyan kingdom

Getting royal brides from Madurai was common even before the Kandyan kingdom. According to the Culavamsa, Rajasingha II revived the practice of securing brides from Madurai. Even kingdoms of Kotte and Sitavaka had South Indian brides. Many walawas in Kandy and Matale are of South Indian Brahmin descent. Even Ehelepola can be traced to a South Indian Brahmin family.

All Nayaka kings of Kandy were practising Buddhists, but they spoke Telugu. The mother and grandmother of the last Sinhala king Narendrasinha was of Nayaka lineage. Nayaka women born and raised in Madurai when married to kings of Kandy became passionately Buddhist. However, they also believed in Hindu gods.

The Mahavamsa describes the female piety and virtues of the two queens of Sri Wickrama Rajasingha. The people of Kandy loved their kings. The Nayaka kings extended their patronage to cultural and religious ceremonies. They also protected the Sacred Tooth Relic. The last stronghold of Nayaka kings rule came to an end in 1815 when the British invaded the Kandyan kingdom. Sri Wickrama Rajasingha was the last Nayaka king of the Kandyan kingdom.

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