

## QUEEN VELU NACHIYAR: FIRST WOMEN AGAINST BRITISH

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### Abstract

Sivagangi is mentioned Shevagungah in British records. It was one of the 72 palayams during the Nayak period. Small Sethu Nadu was otherwise called “Sivagangai Seemai”. It is one of the Marava kingdoms. Sasivarna Thevar formed Sivagangai palayam and he became the first poligar of Sivagangai Seemai. Velu Nachiyar was the wife of Muthuvaduganatha Thevar, the second poligar and first queen who raised the revolt against the British in India and fought for Indian freedom in 17<sup>th</sup> century. Velu Nachiyar was born to King Chellamuthu Sethupathy and Sakkandhi Muthathal Nachiyar in the year of 1730 at Ramanathapuram. Velu Nachiyar was married Muthu Vaduganatha Peria Oodaya Thevar in the year 1746. He was the second Poligar of Sivaganga.

The poligars of Sivaganga refused to pay the tax. So the Nawab of Arcot seats his force against Sivaganga. In July 1772, the Nawab’s forces captured Sivaganga. The invading forces plundered the town and looted jewels worth 50,000 *pagodas*.<sup>1</sup> The name was changed from Sivagangai as “Husain Nagar”. Velu Nachiyar wrote a letter to Hyder Ali for seeking help. After getting the full support from Hyder Ali, Velu Nachiyar returned Virupakshi and formed “*Udaiyal Woman Army*”.<sup>2</sup> Kuyili was an army commander of Udaiyal Woman Army. After the battle with British of Sivaganga, Velu Nachiyar recaptured her palayam. This paper attempts to bring out the history and services of Velu Nachiyar.

**Key Words:** Poligar, Palayam, Pagoda, Valari, Samasthanam, Kalaiyar Koil.

## Introduction

Sivagangai was known as Shevagungah in British record.<sup>3</sup> It was one of the 72 palayams during the Nayak period. Velu Nachiyar and Marudhu Brothers played a vital role against British in Sivagangai. There are number of historical places in and around Sivagangai. Sivagangai was previously known as Sivaganga Seemai. The city of Sivaganga is district headquarters. This district is bounded on the north by Tiruchy and Pudukkottai districts, on the east and south by Ramanathapuram district and on the west by Viruthunagar district.<sup>4</sup>

## Formation of Sivagangai

Sethunadu was otherwise called Maravar Seemai. Regunatha Sethupathy alias Thirukalai Sethupathy ruled Sethunadu during the period between 1647-1672. He appointed his relatives who belonged to the “Uthamanur” for tax collection from the western side of his country. He constructed a castle near Cholapuram to his relative who could look after all duties from the castle. Once this castle was called Nalukottai Palayam. The people who administered were called Nalukottai Palayakkars.<sup>5</sup>

In 1728, Sethu Nadu was divided into two parts – three fifth (3/5) of it was big Sethu Nadu and the other two fifth (2/5) was small Sethu Nadu. Big Sethu Nadu was called as Periya Maravar Nadu. It was also referred to as Ramanathapuram Seemai. Kattaya Thevar alias Vijaya Regunatha Sethu was sworn in as the king of these areas. Small Sethu Nadu was otherwise called “Sivaganga Seemai”.<sup>6</sup>

Nalukottai Udaya Thevar was loyal with Sethupathi of Ramanathapuram. Sasivarna Thevar son of Uadya Thevar of Sivaganga married Akilandeswari Nachiyar daughter of Seethupathi of Ramanathapuram. Sasivarna Thevar recovered 1000 soldiers and land as dowry. Sasivarna Thevar destroyed the forests and formed a city in the name of Sivaganga. He constructed ponds, palace the Raja Rajeswari Temple. The majestic palace was named as “Gowri Vilas” by Sasivarna Thevar.<sup>7</sup>

Sasivarna Thevar had the pride and formed Sivagangai and became the first king of Sivagangai Seemai. Muthu Vadukanathar son of Sasivarna Thevar married Velu Nachiyar daughter of Chellamuthu Sethupathi of Ramanathapuram. After the death of Sasivarna

Thevar, his young son Muthu Vaduganatha Peria Oodaya Thevar became the king of Sivagangai Seemai. He died in the battle of 1772.<sup>8</sup>

## **Velu Nachiyar**

Velu Nachiyar became the first queen of Sivagangai. She was the first lady against the British Empire and fought for India's freedom in 17<sup>th</sup> century. Queen Velu Nachiyar remained as a symbol of bravery for many freedom fighters. She became a role model for women.

In South India warriors and army chiefs were belonged to Marava community. Ramnad and Sivaganga was a major Marava palayams during the Nayak period. Sivaganga had been a closely of Ramnad and they had acted jointly in all external affairs.<sup>9</sup>

## **Childhood**

Velu Nachiyar was born in 1730 at Ramanathapuram. Chellamuthu Sethupathy and Sakkandhi Muthathal Nachiyar were parents. She was only daughter to her parents. Since there was no male heir for the Kingdom, King Chellamuthu Sethupathy wished to grow her daughter like a son. She was trained to use war weapons like sword, valari, silambham, horse riding, and archery and also in martial arts.

She knows the multi languages like Tamil, French, English, Urdu, Malayalam and Telugu. Velu Nachiyar interested in studies and learned Sangam Literature like Pattu Pattu (Ten Collections), Ettutogai (Eight Anthologies), Silapathikaram, Manimegalai, Seevaga Sinthamani, Kundalagesi and Valayapathi, learning was customary one that the heir of Royal Family to be well versed in Tami Epics and art of Warfare. Velu Nachiyar was well versed in all these arts during her early days.<sup>10</sup>

## **Married Life**

Velu Nachiyar was married Muthu Vaduganatha Peria Oodaya Thevar in the year 1746.<sup>11</sup> He was the second Rajah of Sivaganga. Sasivarna Peria Oodaya Thevar died in the year 1750. He was succeeded by his only son Muthu Vaduganatha Peria Oodaya Thevar. Velu Nachiyar inspired by her beauty and brevity and acted as "friend, philosopher and guide" to him.<sup>12</sup> Rani Velu Nachiyar gave birth a female child, and named the princess as "Vellachi Nachiyar".

After the marriage of Velu Nachiyar, she stayed in Sivaganga. She maintained all the administrative activities. The Sivaganga Palace was also called "Gowri Vilasam". It is a

beautiful palace and the residence of the Zamindar of Sivaganga.<sup>13</sup> Now it is a residence of Rani Sahiba Maduranthaki Nachiyar, She is a present Queen in Sivaganga. She acted as fourteenth and hereditary trustee in Sivaganga. Mahesh Rajah, he is a young prince of Sivagangai Samasthanam. He is maintaining all properties of his forefathers.

## **War of 1772**

Muthu Vadukanatha Peria Oodaya Thevar and the Second wife Gowri Nachiyar went to Kalaiyar Koil to worship Lord Siva. Kalaiyar Koil became important place during the period of Velu Nachiyar. Both Sethupathi of Ramnad Sethupathi of Sivaganga refused to pay ta to Nawab of Arcot. In order to collect tax both Nawab and British force invaded to Ramanathapuram and Sivaganga under the Neelan Durai, Commander of British in 1772.

English army led by Bonjore British commander killed the people and heaped. On the other side Joseph Smith British commander conducted a peace talk with Thandavaraya Pillai, Dalavary of Sivagangai while Bonjore attacked suddenly. In this attack the king Muthu Vadukanatha Peria Oodaya and his wife Gowri Nachiyar were died. Children to adults were attacked in the war. The widow Velu Nachiyar and her daughter escaped to Virupakshi, where their two able servants Vella Marudu and Chinna Marudu joined with them. The invading forces plundered the town and collected jewels worth 50,000 *pagodas*.<sup>14</sup> Nawab rule commenced in Sivagangai fort. The elder son of Nawab Umadt-Ul-Umra appointed as a direct representative of Nawab. The new ruler formulated declarations day to day. The name Sivaganga was changed as “Husain Nagar”. The new name Husain Nagar was mentioned in the Nawab and British records.

## **Virupatchi Settlement**

Rani Velu Nachiyar and her daughter Vellachi Nachiyar lived under the protection of Gopala Nayakkar at Virupakshi near Dindigul. Velu Nachiyar troops promised to revenge the British. Dalavay Thandavaraya Pillai and Marudhu brothers also promised to recapture the Samasthan and to punish the British. He advised Velu Nachiyar to move to different places often in order to avoid British invaders. Meanwhile Velu Nachiyar wrote a letter to Hyder Ali seeking his help. She decided to meet Hyder Ali. She met Hyder Ali and explained all her problems with East India Company his detail.

She explained him her strong opposition of British regime. He accepted her request and provided the necessary military assistance. He ordered to provide the required military equipment's to Velu Nachiyar.<sup>15</sup>

### **Army Formation**

After getting the full support from Hyder Ali, Velu Nachiyar returned Virupakshi and formed the army in groups. She formed young army and imparted war field training and decided to form woman army.<sup>16</sup> Women who were sharing and sorrow in the life of Velu Nachiyar, thought they should join in the army service. Velu Nachiyar escaped from Kalaiyar Koil and reached Ariyakurichi Ayyanar Koil and hid herself. The cow shepherd woman saw Velu Nachiyar and did not inform to the English army. British army killed that shepherd women. That woman, whose name was "Udaiyal". So Velu Nachiyar decided and named the woman army as "*Udaiyal Woman Army*". She welcomed the women army with the mind set of assurance and wished them to boldly gents. While Velu Nachiyar imparted training to women in the army.<sup>17</sup>

Velu Nachiyar thought that Silambam teacher Vetrivel was disloyal to her. Kuyili murdered him for his disloyalty. So Velu Nachiyar tried her best to move the army. Kuyili was an army commander of Queen Velu Nachiyar. Every day soldiers were given war front exercises in the early morning and woman armies also were given training in *Valari* weapons handling.<sup>18</sup>

### **Re-settlement of Sivaganga**

Velu Nachiyar and her army planned to capture Sivagangai. Goddess Raja Rejeswari Temple was inside the Sivagangai palace. Vijaya Thasami Vizha was celebrated in grand manner. After long period, the main entrance was opened due to Vijaya Thasami celebration ladies abundantly thronged inside the temple to worship goddess Raja Rajeswari. During that time Velu Nachiyar's army and Udaiyal woman army entered into the temple conceding their arms and weapons.

Kuyili applied ghee and fired on her body and jumped into the British weapon store house. The English East India Company usually housed all their arms in temples. Kuyili was the first human bomb in India against the British. Her brave act paved the way for Nachiyar's victory. This patriotic young woman, who was a human bomb, sacrificed her precious life for the freedom of her mother land from foreign rulers. After triumphing English army, Velu Nachiyar's army entered Sivaganga. Nawab lost control over both the Sivaganga.

Velu Nachiyar captured the throne and Marudhu Brothers act as Ministers during the resettlement of Sivaganga.

### **Last days of Velu Nachiyar**

Sivaganga under the control of Velu Nachiyar and Marudhu Brothers. Vengai Periya Udayana Rajah married Vellachi Nachiyar, the princess and the daughter of Velu Nachiyar. He assumed the Rajaship of Sivaganga in 1791. He gave birth a female child in 1792. Vengai Periya Udaya Rajah was only a nominal ruler while the real powers of the state were in the hands of the Marudhu Brothers.<sup>19</sup>

In 1793, Vellachi Nachiyar and her infant daughter were died cause by discusses. After this incident Velu Nachiyar was highly affected. She suffered by heart problems. Vengam Periya Udaya Thevar was married Muthathal. She was a daughter of Vellai Marudu. So Marudhu Brothers want to rule the Sivaganga. In vanity the Marudhu army captured the castle. After this Velu Nachiyar suffered with heart problem.<sup>20</sup>

Joes-de-Pre took Velu Nachiyars to France for her heart operation and it was done successfully. Velu Nachiyar conducted training in Valari Veechu for the daughter of French king. Velu Nachiyar participated in his protest programmes of politics and gave important suggestion. Velu Nachiyar returned to Sivaganga after six months.<sup>21</sup> In 25<sup>th</sup> December 1796, Queen Velu Nachiyar was passed away in Virupakshi.<sup>22</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Queen Velu Nachiyar was one among the pioneers to resist British East India Company rule in Sivaganga. She had recovered Sivaganga successfully from the company waging valiant wars. Dr. J. Jayalalithaa the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu inaugurated Veeramangai Velu Nachiyar Memorial in Sivagangai on 18 July 2014. And also she ordered that the birth anniversary of Velu Nachiyar will be celebrated as Government function.

## EndNotes

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- <sup>1</sup> *Military Consultation, Vol.42, 1772, p.608.*  
Pagodas is a Gold coin in Vijayanagar century. One Pagoda = Three in half rupees.
  - <sup>2</sup> Jeevabharathi, K., *Velu Nachiyar*, Kumaran Publications, Chennai, 2001, p.156.
  - <sup>3</sup> *Josias Du Pre and Council July, 1772, p.608.*
  - <sup>4</sup> *Human Development Report Sivaganga District*, pg.3.
  - <sup>5</sup> Kamal, S.M., *Seermigu Sivagangai Seemai*, Pasumpon District Art, Literature and Historical Research Centre, Sivagangai, 1997, p.81.
  - <sup>6</sup> Jeevabharathi, K., *Op.cit.*, pp. 40-41.
  - <sup>7</sup> Ramaswami, A., *Tamil Nadu District Gazetteers of Ramanathapuram*, The Director of Stationary and Printing, Madras, 1972, pp.91.
  - <sup>8</sup> Jeevabharathi, K., *Velu Nachiyar*, Kumaran Publications, Chennai, 2001, pp. 40-41.
  - <sup>9</sup> Kadhivel, S., *History of the Maravas 1700-1802*, Madurai publishing House, Madurai, 1977, p.100-101.
  - <sup>10</sup> Madhan Kumar, Ki., *Thamizh is Not just a Language - The Valour*, Educreation Publishing, New Delhi, 2011, pp. 18-19.
  - <sup>11</sup> *Government of Information and Public Relations Department*, Sivaganga, 07.11.2017.
  - <sup>12</sup> *District Human Development Report*, Sivaganga, 2017.
  - <sup>13</sup> *District Census Hand Book*, Sivaganga, 2011.
  - <sup>14</sup> *Josias Du Pre and Council July, 1772, pp.607-608.*
  - <sup>15</sup> *Government of Information and Public Relations Department*, Sivaganga, 07.11.2017.
  - <sup>16</sup> JeevaBharathi. *Op.cit.*, p.155.
  - <sup>17</sup> Kamaal., *Op.cit.*, pp.74-75.
  - <sup>18</sup> Gurusamy, A.Sa., *Varalattrup Pugazhpettra Indiya Veeranganaigal*, Chennai, 2006, pp.6-7.
  - <sup>19</sup> Kadhivel, S., *Op.cite.*, pp.167-169.
  - <sup>20</sup> Balakrishnan., M., *A Struggle for Freedom in the Red soil of South.*, Sivagangai, 2011, pp.194-195.
  - <sup>21</sup> Seekar, M., *Veeram Vellaintha Sevaganai Seemai Semman*, Kalaiyarkoil, 2004, p.33.
  - <sup>22</sup> *Government of Information and Public Relations Department*, Sivaganga, 07.11.2017.