

**Local Assemblies of Nanjinad Vellalas – A Study**

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**Abstract**

*The present paper Local Assemblages of Nanjinad Vellalas deals about the local assemblies of the Vellalas played a decisive role in the administration of Nanjinad. In Nanjinad there were three types of kuttam named urkuttampidagaikuttam and nattukuttam. Of the three kuttams ,natukuttam was the most powerful it discuss he affairs of Nanjinadu as a whole. All the members of the kuttams were Nanjinadu Vellalas. Of the three kuttamsnatukuttam was the most powerful one. The local assemblies played an important role in protecting their traditional culture particularly the caste customs and Hindu religion in Nanjinadu. The grievances of the Vellalas voiced at the forum of the council and resolutions were passed and sent to the higher authorities concerned for redressal.*

**KeyWords:** - Purananuru,Kuttam, Dharmakartha, Kariyasthan, Pidagai

The NanjinaduVellalas, a Tamil speaking caste group seem to have migrated from the Tamilnadu and settled down in Nanjinadu. They were land owners and tillers of the soil and held offices during the medieval Tamil Country. The term Nanjil occurs in Purananuru. Nanjil means ploughshare Nanjil has been famous for its prosperous paddy cultivation. Nanjinadu is the land of agriculture. "Nanjil" denotes the region of bastions or forts represented by the natural barriers like hills fortifying the land. They formed a minority and lived in different places of the erstwhile State of Travancore. Matters of local interest that emerged in the day-to-day life of the people were regulated by the law making and administering organization called *Kuttam*. In Nanjinadu there were three types of *kuttam* named *urkuttampidagaikuttam* and *nattukuttam*. Of the three *kuttams* *natukuttam* was the most powerful it discussed the affairs of Nanjinadu as a whole. All the members of the *kuttams* were NanjinaduVellalas. According to T.K. Velupillai the administration of the local affairs was conducted by the people of the locality. These assemblies played an important role in protecting the traditional cultural values of the Vellalas.

### **Ur-Kuttam**

*Ur* formed the smallest unit of administration. The *Urkuttam* represented by the Karanvans of the families' was held to discuss matters relating to *ur* (village). The Muttu Pillai otherwise called as *Dharmakartha* was the chief patronage of the village. He presided over the head of the village. The office of the headman was hereditary. The *Kariyasthan* (secretary) Muthupillai (treasurer) and Pillai (accountant) were the important officers of the village under the headman. The village assembly had the charge and management of village temple, that is the power to appoint temple accountants and priests and regulates the

system of worship and settle social disputes. The main function of the council was to settle dispute pertaining to partition of the immovable properties. Disputes among the people of the village were settled of at the village council settlement headed by the Muttupillai. Further divorces on account adultery was adjudicated by the village assembly. The cases were decided in with the conformity with the local customs and conventions.

Maravas were appointed by the village assembly for the protection of the persons and property of Vellalas in all the villages. The council punished those who acted against the prohibitions imposed by village assembly. For their services they were paid in kind by the villagers.

### **Pidagaikuttam and Nattukuttam**

*Pidagai* was a sub-division comprising few villages. There is evidence to show that before the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD the whole of Nanjinadu was divided into twelve *pidagais* and that there was *pidagaikuttam*. The twelve *pidagais* were important centers of Nanjinadu Vellala . The chief men of villages within a *pidagai* met to decide matters on common interest. The chief man in a *pidagai* was Pidagai Mudaliyar. Leaving the trial of capital crimes to the rulers, the Mudaliyar exercised civil and criminal laws within his jurisdiction and imposed fine and punishment on the culprits in the whole *pidagai*.

The *Nattukuttam* was composed of the representatives of twelve *pidagais* and the *nattukuttam* held its meeting whenever found necessary for serving the administrative purposes of Nanjinadu. Each *pidagai* used to send two or three members to *nattukuttam*. They met once year at Sthanumalaya Perumal Temple, Suchindram in the month of Markazhi during the time of

Car Festival. The *nattukuttam* assembled mainly on two grounds, it assembled under the orders of kings and by the spontaneous will of the people.

The *nadu* assembly met under the guidance of PeriyaveettuMudaliyar of Azhakiyapandipuram. He was their leader who championed the cause of rights and privileges of the NanjinaduVellalas. The Mudaliyar carried a rod with silver knob as the symbol of his authority. It is said that the Mudaliyar exercised civil and criminal jurisdiction over the members of the community in the days of their glory. Mudaliyars enjoyed the privilege of riding palanquins. *Nittu* documents from the palace were dispatched directly to the Mudaliyar. Information regarding birth, marriage, illness and death of ant members of the royal family was conveyed to him by special *nittu*.

The *pidagaikar* exercised greater authority in Nnjinadu than the government. They discussed the way in which an individual to be dealt with, if he violated the customs and practices of his own caste and how to proceed against a person who adopted the customs, practices and general habits of a caste which were alien to his own caste. Those who got converted into Christianity met with great opposition from the *pidagaikar*. The *pidagaikar* hatched a plot against the Christian converts. Col. Munro, in order to establish British paramount over Nanjinadu suppressed the *nattukuttams* because they were staunchly against the propagation of Christian religion.

### **Destruction of Nattukuttam**

UmmniThambi the Diwan of Travancore deprived NanjinaduVellalas of their bell metal trumpet while was given to them by the Sirkar as a mark of distinction and their right of assemblage in large bodies to remonstrate against government. Colonel John Munro the Resident

Diwan in Travancore brought forth number of reforms intended to centralize the administration of Travancore. For the proper administration of justice a court of appeal and five Zilla courts were established. The result of all these measures was that the village assemblies declined in importance and disappeared from Travancore by the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their hateful and overbearing manners towards Christians and lower castes irritated Munro. When Munro was staying at the Udayagiri fort the members of this council went in a grant procession holding loft their flags and staffs and sounding their drums to make a special request to him. The resident observing the disrespectful attitude of the council which approached him without permission, allowed them to enter his premises. When they all got inside the fort, he ordered his escorts to overpower them and seize all their paraphernalia and break all their drums and staffs. They were imprisoned though released sometime later. Then Col. Munro abolished this council by a Royal Proclamation in 1818 AD prohibiting all the political meeting in Nanjinadu.

### **Conclusion**

The local assemblies played an important role in protecting their traditional culture particularly the caste customs and Hindu religion in Nanjinadu. The grievances of the Vellalas voiced at the forum of the council and resolutions were passed and sent to the higher authorities concerned for redressal. When the King failed to protect the life and property of the people, the people rallied under the *nattukuttams*. To Vellalas the council became the savior when they were in trouble. The deep rooted system of social life became outmoded and fell into disuse with the British taking up the reigns of administration.

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