



TRANCORE ARMY UNDER MARTHANDA VARMA 1729-1758



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ABSTRACT

Marthanda Varma, a powerful ruler of Travancore, succeeded his uncle, king Rama Varma, in 904 M.E(1729 AD.) During this period Travancore faced internal and external threats. Under his able guidance and leadership Travancore rose to prominence as a powerful military state. Travancore at the time of Marthanda Varma's accession to the Trippappur Swarupam Tiruvitamkode or later Travancore) presented a picture of disorder and confusion. There was no proper administrative machinery for the transaction of Government business. The finances of the kingdom were in an extremely un-satisfactory state. The authority of the king was nowhere respected. The Pillamar and the Matampimar had established themselves as a powerful force in the public life of the state and they were supported by the Yogakkar. In short, the feudal elements had the upper hand in the affairs of the state. The rivalries of European powers like the Dutch and the English made the situation more complex. Thus, on his accession to the throne, Marthanda Varma had to face a perilous situation.

KEYWORDS

Marthanda Varma, Travancore, threats, European powers, Rama Varma

RESEARCH PAPER

Modernisation of Travancore army :

When Marthanda Varma Came to power in 1729, his ambition was also to recover the territories once controlled by the Venad rulers. There was no well-organised standing army, equipped, trained and disciplined. He inherited the command over the feudal army which adopted traditional methods of warfare. Moreover, the King's authority was very weak and he had neither financial resources nor man power to create a standing army because of the influence of the feudal barons who controlled much of the land. It was under these circumstances that Marthanda Varma decided to "cast aside the traditional rules of warfare" by stages.

The country called Travancore was formed by annexing a number of petty independent principalities whose rulers were in constant warfare not only with each other but also with the Raja of Travancore. The ambition of Marthanda Varma led him to a suppression of such aggressions on the part of those states and for this purpose he raised the Militia as emergencies occurred and with their assistance those principalities were attacked, conquered and subdued, and thus the king of Travancore. The army was composed by the subscription of one individual by each householder for the soldiery, whose arms were bows and arrows, shields, swords, axes, spears and a peculiar musket known by the name "Kottapidithoke" Since the soldiers of the new Militia used traditional weapons, it is to be presumed that the Militia was organized in the traditional manner and that the methods of warfare were traditional in character.

After his accession to the throne, Marthanda Varma appointed Kumar Swami Pillai as his commander-in-chief, with Thanu Pillai as his assistant. They formed the army by enrolment of the sons of the soil in large numbers. The soldiers were supplied with better arms and strict discipline was enforced. A better sense of loyalty and obedience was enforced among the rank and file. This reform had far-reaching consequences. It enabled the Maharaja to take the fullest advantage of the courage and military skill of his subjects who had not only the physical training in the Kalaris but also the inspiration of along tradition of success in the field. "Many of the was like Colachel and combined attacks of the Dutch and Malabar princes were won before D 'Lannoy had entered service in Travancore.

"As a measure of prudent statesmanship, Marthanda Varma disbanded the contingent of mercenaries which had been entertained in the previous regin. The pay of these hired soldiers

was in arrears and the men took the law into their own hands to enforce payment. They seized the Dalwa and placed him in custody at Thrkkanamkutty beyond the Aramboly frontier. The Dalawa was so popular with the people that the wealthy merchants came to contribute their share and soon the arrears were paid off. But the mercenary force refused to release the Dalawa till the last cash was paid. The Maharaja thus ordered Kumaraswami Pillai to proceed towards Thrkkanamkutty with a suitable force". The attitude of the mercenaries was a great lesson to the Maharaja and he resolved to avail himself of the fighting material of his own kingdom. This might have led him to the conclusion that large standing army was inevitable.

In the Militia, there were also musketeers who were infantry soldiers. Now it has become an obsolete kind of rifle. The barrels of muskets made by them were very heavy compared with those of the Europeans. With these heavy weapons, they could nearly match with the Europeans in their march. The bullets used by them were not round in shape but "grape-shot of various shapes".

They took a very sure aim to fire and the first shot generally hit and often inflicted great mischief. "The Travancore infantry was always good. There were draft elephants but not much of cavalry".

In 1734 Quilon and Kayamkulam were attacked by the Maharaja's forces under the joint command of Kumaraswami Pillai, Thanu Pillai and Ramayyan. At this time the Travancore army was strengthened with the addition of cavalry and infantry. Moreover, new fire-arms were obtained from the English merchants trading at Anjengo and Edava. Thus at the time when the Dutch advanced in South Travancore between Colachel and Kottar, the Travancore army consisted of infantry, artillery, musketeers, elephants and cavalry; and the cavalry was commanded by Ramayyan. In spite of the fact that there were few fire-arms purchased from the English, the army was not even partly European but mainly native in character. This native army which was powerful enough to defeat the European army met at Colachel on 10th August 1741. Marthanda Varma did not forget to strengthen the infantry stationed in South Travancore by the addition of new Nair soldiers. The timely reorganization brought in the army by Marthanda Varma and the martial quality of the Travancoreans helped him to win battle after battle, including the battle of Colachel. The war with the Dutch revealed to him the superiority of the trained infantry over the feudal levies.

Standing army of Marthanda Varma

Marthanda Varma was wise enough to realise the necessity of keeping men in a permanent military service to ensure safety and peace in the conquered provinces.

Six thousand men of the Travancore army were defeated at Quilon by the Dutch and were forced to retreat in 1742. This incident might have shocked Marthanda Varma and he might have been fully convinced of the fact that a standing army, trained and disciplined on the European model with European weapons, was inevitable for the safety of the country. Marthanda Varma finally decided to form a standing army under the guidance and instruction of D' Lannoy, one of the prisoners captured in the battle of Colachel. Thus for the first time in the history of Travancore a standing army trained on the European model came into existence.

The role of Captain D'Lannoy :

Marthanda Varma appointed Captain D' Lannoy as Captain of His Highness service for modernising the army. He recruited the sons of the soil including "Nairs, Nadars, Ezhavas and Christians" The documents preserved in the Trivandrum temple, show that Marthanda Varma's soldiers were men recruited from within Travancore itself.

D'Lannoy instructed men in western methods of warfare. It was he that constructed modern fire-arms for Travancore, swords, guns, built for the fort and the ramparts of pooliakurichee and the arsenal there. In October 1744 the King of Travancore received one hundred and fifty arms from the Anjengo Government, and in December 1744 the Travancore Maharaja received from the English two hundred small arms. Agreements were made between the Company's authorities at Anjengo and the Maharaja for the ready procuring of gun powder, flints, arms and ammunition, and accordingly in 1744 the king of Travancore was supplied with thirty barrels of gun-powder and two thousand flints. Year after year in accordance with the needs of the time, arms and ammunition were supplied to the Maharaja in exchange for pepper. This regular flow of European weapons helped to Europeanize the army under the guidance of D' Lannoy.

D'Lannoy made everything that was requisite for the defence of the county, brought into the service several men of his race as chieftains in the different corps which he thoroughly organized by the name "pullipattalam which consisted of 72 battalions of 200 men each, where in the artillery was also included" There were, besides, six regiments of infantry styled as the "Carnatic Brigade" whose headquarters were first at Paraur and afterwards at Alleppey. A "regiment was consisted of 10 companies and 114 men including officers in each and the whole of the 72 Pullies and the Carnatic Brigade together with the attached or in other words the entire military establishment of Travancore amounted in all to 30,000 men.

Captain D' Lannoy divided the whole Travancore into three faces – Eastern, Western and Southern and over these he distributed the whole army in due proportion. The head-quarters

of the army were at Pooliakurichee where captain D'Lannoy resided. All reports were made to His Highness through the native head-com-mandant called Valia Yejamanan. The chief contonments were at Padmanabhapuram, Trivandrum and Quilon. The trained army was divided into three categories – infantry, cavalry and artillery Besides these three divisions of the army, there was also the traditional Militia. Therefore the army of Marthanda Varma was a combination of the modern and the ancient, the regular and the irregular army. The regular army was the national army of the country trained in modern methods of warfare and the irregular army followed the old system of warfare, but greater importance was given to the regular army. Marthanda Varma maintained the irregular army also with traditional weapons, in order to utilise the men trained in the Kalaris and their experiences in the battles.

The re-organization of the army brought about changes in the social and economic structure of the society of Travancore. The social privilege of the Nairs as a military class ended consequently their position in the society began to decline. The martial spirit of the Nair nobles declined. Before the time of Marthanda Varma, the strength of a king depended mainly on his Nair force. The Nair soldiers were directly under the Naduvazhi. The Naduvazhis were the military chiefs of the provinces. The re-organization of the army destroyed the feudal social structure and in the new army there was no place for the feudal barons who had been the lords of the land and heads of the Militia in their respective districts. The lands of the feudal lords like Ettuvitil Pillaimar had already been confiscated and all chieftains now had to pay taxes to the Government.

Conclusion :

Marthanda Varma also destroyed the feudalism in the conquered countries by annexing the lands of the chiefs of the conquered territories. “He annexed the lands of the former chiefs to his new state. Many of these chiefs were probably Nairs themselves perhaps claiming high ranks as in Malabar. The land was the principal source of their economic power and Marthanda Varma’s action more or less destroyed it. By annexation meant transfer of Janmom rights from individual chiefs to the Travancore State”. Thus the Europeanization of the army resulted in the liberation of the country from feudalism, and the liberation of the Nairs from their traditional occupation of compulsory military service under their immediate feudal lords. The reorganization of the army made the state supreme by destroying the “Old system of Nair States”. Thus the second half of the 18th centry witnessed the destruction of the political predominance of the Nairs. The re-organization and modernization of the military transformed the country into a powerful military state.

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