



**TRACING THE HISTORICITY OF PUNNATHUR ROYAL FAMILY IN  
THE COLONIAL KERALA**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper discuss about the Punnathur royal family near Guruvayur, the pilgrim centre in the Trissur district . In the pre -colonial period it was a feudatory of Zamorians of Calicut. In the Mamankam festival the Nambidi stood in the right part of Zamorin. During the Colonial period the royal family was under the Court of Wards .This institution was under the direct control of District Collector .The property administered by the Court of Wards was called an estate. The purpose of the paper is to explore the significance and status of the Punnathur royal family through the ages.

**Key words:** Punnattur, Kalari, Nadagasala, Nambidi, Desam, Taravad

The Punnathur Kingdom was in and around Punnathur, Near Guruvayoor the pilgrim centre in the Thichur District. At present the kingdom is mainly remembered through the Punnathur Kotta, the private elephant sanctuary of the Guruvayur Devaswam. But Punnathur had a long history. Through centuries it was in conflict or connection with the Cochin State and the Zamorin. But not much is known about the early history of Punnathur but there are sources for constructing the history of this kingdom when it came under the Court of Wards of colonial government, in the form of official records. In spite of this no historical work has come out on this kingdom. This paper looks in to the history of Punnathur and its conditions under Court of Wards.

Punnathur Kotta, the residence of Punnathur Nambidies has been in the Guruvayoor amsom nearly a mile to the north of the 16 th milestone on the Thrithala road. The kingdom of Punnathur comprised the area of present Chavakkad in Trissur district. Chavakkad extended along the seaboard from Veliyamkode to the farthest limit of the Ponnani taluk. Chavakkad was originally bestowed to the Kakkad Nambudiris by the Zamorin in gratitude for his patriotic actions. The descendents of the Kakkad Nambudiris became the Punnathur Nambidies. These rulers of Chavakkad were too weak to resist the aggression of their powerful neighbours, the Cochin Raja and the Zamorin. Bit by bit they were deprived of their territories. In 1791 the Nambidies were reduced by the Zamorin to the humiliating position of the revenue collector. An allownace of Rs. 20,000 per annum about one fifth of the revenue of the district was paid to him by Zamorin.<sup>1</sup> The Punnathur Nambidies were very ficle in their allegiance to the Zamorin and Cochin and transfered it as circumstances guided them.<sup>2</sup> When their arose a rivalry between the Duch and the Cochin the Punnathur Nambidies was on the side os Cochin Raja.<sup>3</sup> In 1716 the Raja of Punnathur openly joined with the Zamorin.

Earlier in 1504, in the struggle against the Portuguese the Zamorin had re-ceived help from the Punnattur Nambidi.<sup>4</sup> During the pre-colonial period Punnattur was a fudatory of Zamorin. In the Mamankam festival the Nambidi stood the right part of Zamorin.<sup>5</sup> Punnattur Kotta was erected between 1754 and 1758. It is a low tiled building enclosing the open courtyard with its spacious garden and adjoining temples and tanks is a typical residence of a Malayali noble man. The *Kalari* or fencing school near the main building a relic of the past and there is a Nadagasala for staging drama near it <sup>6</sup>. When the kingdom Zamorin came under the British in 1792, Punnattur Nambidies also came under colonialism. In 1894 the Punnattur family came under the Court Wards when its head fell in arrears of pay due to the colonial government. The heavy balance in Punnattur is reported to be due to adverse season.<sup>7</sup> Then it became an estate under the Court Wards.

One of the measures employed by the British to control local chieftains was the taking over of the administration of the property under each chieftains when the later failed to govern it or when the heir to the property was as minor. It was also when the local chieftain fell in the arrears of payment due to the British. The device used by the British to establish direct rule over the property of such chieftains was the office of the Court of Wards. Ward means a minor for whose person or property or both there is a guardian.<sup>8</sup>

This institution was under the control of the District Collector. During the pe-riod of colonialism, Collector was the highest district official responsible for the collection of revenue and maintainance of law and order.<sup>9</sup> The office of the Court of Wards had its own office and bureaucracy to carryout the administraton of the property under its controll. Its duty was to collect rent from the tenants, manage the property an arrange for the education of the cheiftain or the Zamindar. This was under the theoretical hope that the younger ones in the family

would become able enough to take back their estate and manage them.<sup>10</sup> If the proprietor of certain estate had died leaving minor sons the government would take over its administration and rule it through the Court of Wards. Usually the Collector would send report regarding management of the property of the Zamindar. If it was stated that there was mismanagement of property the Board of Revenue had the power to disqualify proprietor. Then the proprietor would be known as Ward.<sup>11</sup>

The property administered by the Court of Wards was called as 'estate'. In the beginning of the 20th century there were thirty nine estates under Court of Wards in the Madras Presidency. Important among them are Bodogodo (Ganjam Dist) Belgam (Vizagapattanam Dist), Pithapuram (Godavari Dist), Kalahasti (North Arcot), Rayakota (Salem Dist), Carvent Nagar (North Arcot) and so on. In India it is instituted in 1790 by the English East India Company. Under the system of Court of Wards the estate was entrusted to a manager. The manager was to ensure a steady revenue to the colonial government. Financial re-organisation, improvement of estates, the development of wards all were involved in the responsibilities of the manager<sup>12</sup>.

In Kerala the two estates under the Court of Wards have been the Kavalappara and Punnattur Kovilakam.<sup>13</sup> Kavalappara family is in the present Ottappalam taluk of Palakkad district. It is a typical Nair Taravad in South Malabar<sup>14</sup>.

The Kavalappara family and its property came under the rule of the Court of Wards in 1872 following the death of Moopil Nair<sup>15</sup>. According to the matrilineal system of succession his nephew was to become the next Karanavar. But he had no nephew and his only niece was a six years old girl. By this time Kavalappara Mooppil Nair was fallen in debts also. This was mainly because of the huge expenditure incurred in the maintenance of the retainers amounting to 150. The estate had a debt of Rs. 70,000/- .

Under these circumstances the government made provision for the effective administration of the Court of Wards<sup>16</sup>.

The estate of Punnattur which comprises more than 6000 acres of land scattered over eight *desams* of the taluk and also includes land in Cochin state. The Court of Wards made arrangements for the education of the minor members of the family. The minor was educated at the Zamorins College of Calicut. A debt of nearly two lakhs was in the thirteen years reduced to about Rs 30,000/-. A valuable property would be handed over to the Nambidi in 1911<sup>17</sup>.

The Punnattur Raja made a representation to the Court of Wards that he may be made independent of the Zamorin. The Government informed the Raja that the original proposal that he should remain a subordinate to the Zamorin could not be altered without the mutual consent of the parties<sup>18</sup>. The estate lands were scattered in various parts of the Ponnani taluk and were interspersed with the lands of other jennies<sup>19</sup>. Punnattur Raja paid the assessment of 51 *desams* under him direct into the company's treasury<sup>20</sup>.

During the period of Tippu Sultan, Punnattur Raja was prevented by the Cochin Raja from reaping the harvest<sup>21</sup>. He requested the commissioner to issue order to the Cochin Raja to relinquish his title to the lands. The collector of Chavakkad allowed an exemption for charitable and religious purposes<sup>22</sup>. In the Punnattur Kovilagam the lump out lay originally provided for monsoon repairs was found to admit of considerable reduction<sup>23</sup>.

During the 1901 the Punnattur minors made fair progress during the year. The Punnattur male wards who were under private tuition are reported to have made fair progress. In the absence of local facilities for education or for other reasons the two elder Punnattur minors were removed during the *Fasli* to Palavaram, Tanjore and Calicut respectively<sup>24</sup>.

Four of the five female relatives of the Punnattur ward were taught Malayalam under a private tutor and arrangements have since been made to give them lesson in English, Arithmetic, Geography, Needle work and Music girls became educated.<sup>25</sup>

In Punnattur the heavy arrears were mainly due to the managers inefficiency. He has since been replaced. The Punnattur estate owed a sum of Rs. 10,000/- to Guruvayur *devaswam*<sup>26</sup>. Punnattur estate was under the court management for 18 years and 11 months during which period its revenue demand rose from Rs. 100,412 to Rs. 23,087, debt amounting to Rs. 39,256 were recovered and debts aggregating Rs. 2,05,982 were paid. Rupees 41,292 were spent on improvements such as construction of markets, buildings etc. The wards were educated at Calicut. The senior ward passed the matriculation examination. He was also instructed in Revenue law and in the management of his estate<sup>27</sup>.

The legacy of Punnattur Cheiftains are seen even today. The area of pookkode near Guruvayur became famous as Kottapadi as it was near the Punnattur Kotta. Later Pookode became panchayat. Now as noted in the bigning Punnattur Kotta is under the Guruvayur *devaswam*. It is used as a habitat for the elephants of Guruvayur *devaswam*. There are 45 elephants<sup>28</sup>. The *vavu* festial at Punnattur which is connected with the Punnattur Raja is famous. The *Kathakali Yogam* of Punnattur Kotta has also been celebrated. For the sake of the development of trade the Punnattur kings brought Christian traders to Kottappadi and made them settled there. The present St.Lawrence Church and R.C.U.P. School are the legacy of the original settlers<sup>29</sup>.

Punnattur Christians had close connection with native Islamic people when Tippu Sulthan attacked the area the Ettuveetil Panikkars, who were the defenders of the Punnattur Royal family got the able assistance from the Islamic community led by Hydras Kutty Moopar and Choppan

Alikutty. It was with the help of these people that the Panikkars could defend Punnattur to an extent. So the Tippu's forces couldn't make much harm to the area. This religious harmony exists in the area even today. The people belonging to the Hindu, Christian and Islamic communities live in close co-operation here.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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