

A pioneer in polygars' uprising against East India Company



M. Rajendran, former IAS officer and author of 'Kaalabaani' novel.

For contact: dr.mrajendran@gmail.com

Every year September 5 is observed to remember the freedom fighters such as V. O. Chidambaram and Vellaya Devan. It is on this same day that Virupatchi polygar Gopal Naicker's memorial day is also observed.

Sridhar Velusamy, great-grandson of Ponnappa Naicker, son of Gopal Naicker, tried to confirm the execution date of his forefather through a Right to Information Act petition. His application was sent to the Dindigul Collector's office which was, in turn, forwarded to the Department of Information and Public Relations. But the response was that there were no documents to prove that Gopal Naicker was hanged on September 5.

I have been engaged in search for and collection of documents related to the freedom struggles in South Tamil, which happened before and after the Kalaiyarkovil battle. I ferreted out some documents from the Tamil Nadu Archives and Historical Research at Egmore in Chennai. The documents were letters written by the Lieutenant-General of the East India Company James Inns, which narrated the sequences of events starting with arrest of Gopal Naicker on March 23, 1801 and

culminating in his hanging.

Writing about the events that followed the second-time arrest of Gopal Naicker, James Inns says, "Virupatchi Gopal Naicker, Kuzhandai Vellai and Vellaiyan Servaikkarar were hanged in front of the demolished fort at Virupatchi."

It is clear from Inns' letter that Virupatchi Gopal Naicker was executed on November 20, 1801. The letter confirmed what the government department could not.

The polygars' uprising against the East India Company, which originated from Poolithevan, turned more intense in 1801. Coordinated by Chinna Marudhu, the polygars' agitation spread from Nanguneri to Pune. But the South Tamil Nadu's polygars' uprising that began with a bang ended soon with a whimper. The reasons are not only the British arm's strategies but also traitors who had been enticed with money and land by the East India Company.

The ruling East India Company hanged thousands of men all over South Tamil Nadu, who were involved along with the Marudhu brothers in the Kalaiyarkovil battle and also charged with helping the native warriors.

Going through the documents and conjuring up the pictures of the events that marked October-November 1801, one can't help but feel terrified. Virupatchi Gopal Naicker, who was one of those hanged, was charged with, among other things, refusing to oblige the then Dindigul Collector who wanted from him a horse and a horseman required for the postal work.

In the proclamation, the Madras Governor Edward Clive charged Virupatchi Gopal Naicker with working against the East India Company in tandem with Chinna Marudhu. Among the other charges laid at the doorstep of Virupatchi Gopal Naicker his refusal to fulfill the demand for horse was one. From this it is clear that the British in those days were just searching for reasons, howsoever flimsy they may be, to harass and hang the polygars.

In fact, Virupatchi Gopal Naicker's role in South Tamil Nadu's struggles was more significant and can hardly be underestimated. It was he, who gave shelter to Sivagangai Velu Nachiar in the Virupatchi forests for seven years, who had lost her kingdom, left only with her baby in arms. Virupatchi Gopal Naicker supported her in mobilizing her army led by minister Thandavaraya Pillai and commanders Periya Marudhu and Chinna Marudhu.

The foot of Virupatchi Palayam's black mountain was the secret haunt of South Tamil Nadu fighters whom Virupatchi Gopal Naicker supported immensely, supplying them arms and facilitating training in arms, correspondence among the fighters and

money for struggles. It was Virupatchi Gopal Naicker who was the beacon of hope for the freedom fighters.

After Dindigul's first Peshcush Collector Hardish took charge in 1798, he and his army officials kept tabs on Virupatchi Gopal Naicker and often wrote to the Madras Governor in this regard. At last, Naththam tahsildar Naththarkhan betrayed him. In exchange for this betrayal, what the tahsildar got by way of bribe was just a horse!

However, on the fifth day of arrest, Gopal Naicker, along with his son Muthuvellai Naicker, escaped.

Meanwhile, Chinna Marudhu's warriors killed the tahsildar and so the East India Company's officials' anger towards Chinna Marudhu and Gopal Naicker intensified.

On May 6, 1801, both father and son – Gopal Naicker and Muthuvellai Naciker - were again arrested. The company, which used to hang the fighters at the places where they were famous, adopted a go-slow technique in the case of Gopal Naicker. James Inns, Dindigul Lieutenant, says that it was because of Gopal Naicker's old age and good personal qualities.

Gopal Naicker was a pioneer, protector, and patron for freedom fighters such as Marudhu brothers, Oomaidurai, Yathalappa Naicker, Chinnamalai, Sheik Husain and so on, who took part in the South Tamil Nadu wars.

Based on the letter purportedly written by the Lieutenant James Inna, it is confirmed that Gopal Naicker was hanged on November 20, 1801. So, instead of observing Sept. 5, the government must observe November 5 as Gopal Naicker's memorial day for it was the real day of his hanging.

When genuine data are available, history must correct itself; shouldn't it?

November 20 was the day when Virupatchi Gopal Naicker was hanged.

Translated by V.Mariappan.