



Matrix June 2001

Legends from the South: Veerapandiya Kattabomman

The struggle for freedom from the British, saw the emergence of many patriots who fought, made sacrifices and even lost their lives defending the country. Exhibiting great courage, Tamils were among those who sowed the seeds for the freedom movement. One such pioneer was Veerapandiya Kattabomman. Eighteen kilometres north west of Tirunelveli lies the hamlet of Panchalankurichi, a place of historical significance.

The chieftains ruling Panchalankurichi put up stiff resistance against the British East India Company, between 1798 and 1801. Veerapandiya Kattabomman was a fearless chieftain who refused to bow down to the demands of the British for agricultural tax on native land, a brave warrior who laid down his life for his motherland. The fight he launched in Panchalankurichi has been hailed as the inspiration behind the first battle of independence of 1857, which the British called the Sepoy Mutiny.

Azhagiya Veerapandiapuram (Ottapidaram of today) was ruled by Jagaveera Pandiyan. He had a minister Bommu who had migrated from Andhra Pradesh to Tamil Nadu who was a brave warrior. He was known as Gettibommu in Telugu to describe his strength and fighting qualities. This, over a period of time, became Kattabomman in Tamil. Kattabomman ascended the throne after Jagaveera Pandiyan, who had no issue, and later came to be known as Adi Kattabomman, the first of the clan of Kattabomman.

Legend has it that during a hunting trip into the forests of Salikulam (close to Azhagiya Pandiyapuram) Kattabomman watched the spectacle of a hare chasing seven hounds. Kattabomman was amazed at this miracle. Believing that the land possessed great powers that could instil courage in people, he built his fort there and named it Panchalankurichi. Born in this clan of Adi Kattabomman was Veerapandiyan on January 3, 1760 – the 47th king of Panchalankurichi – to Jagaveera Kattabomman and Arumugathammal. He had two younger brothers Dalavai Kumarasami and Duraisingam. Veerapandiyan was fondly called ‘Karuthaiah’ (the black prince), and Dalavai Kumarasami,

‘Sivathaiah’ (the white prince). Duraisingam, a good orator, earned the sobriquet ‘Oomaidurai’, which actually meant the very opposite – the dumb prince. On February 2, 1790, Veerapandiyan, thirty, became the king of Panchalankurichi. The Nawab of Arcot who had borrowed huge sums of money from the East India Company gave them the right to collect taxes and levies from the southern region in lieu of the money he had borrowed.

The East India Company took advantage of the situation and plundered all the wealth of the people in the name of tax collection. All the ‘poligars’ paid taxes except Veerapandiyan. Kattabomman refused to pay his dues and for a long time refused to meet Jackson the Collector of the East India Company. Finally, he met Jackson at ‘Ramalinga Vilasam’, the palace of Sethupathi of Ramanathapuram.

The meeting ended in a skirmish in which the Deputy Commandant of the Company’s forces, Clarke was slain. Kattabomman and his men fought their way to freedom and safety, but Thanapathi Pillai, Kattabomman’s secretary was taken prisoner. The Commission of Enquiry that went into the incident fixed the blame on Jackson and relieved him of his post, thinking the Company’s plan to take over the entire country gradually could be marred by Jackson’s fight with Veerapandiya Kattabomman.

The new Collector of Tirunelveli wrote to Kattabomman calling him for a meeting on 16th March, 1799. Kattabomman wrote back citing the extreme drought conditions for the delay in the payment of dues and also demanded that all that was robbed off him at Ramanathapuram be restored to him. The Collector wanted the ruling house of Sethupathis to prevent Kattabomman from aligning himself with the enemies of the Company and decided to attack Kattabomman.

Kattabomman refused to meet the Collector and a fight broke out. Under Major Bannerman, the army stood at all the four entrances of Panchalankurichi’s fort. At the southern end, Lieutenant Collins was on the attack. When the fort’s southern doors opened, he was killed by Kattabomman’s warriors.

After suffering heavy losses, the English decided to wait for reinforcements from Palayamkottai. Sensing that his fort could not survive a barrage from heavy cannons, Kattabomman left the fort that night. A price was set on Kattabomman’s head. Thanapathi Pillai and 16 others were taken prisoners. Thanapathi Pillai was executed and his head perched on a bamboo pole was displayed at Panchalankurichi.

Veerapandiya Kattabomman stayed at Kolarpatti a Rajagopala Naicker’s house where the forces surrounded the house. Kattabomman and his aides fled from there and took refuge in the Thirukalambur forests close to Pudukkottai. Bannerman ordered the ruler of Pudukkottai to arrest Kattabomman. Accordingly Kattabomman was captured and on October 16, 1799 the case was taken up (nearly three weeks after his arrest near Pudukkottai).

After a summary trial, Kattabomman was hanged unceremoniously on a tamarind tree. The fort of Panchalankurichi was razed to the ground and all of Kattabomman’s wealth was looted by the English soldiers. A fort constructed by the Tamil Nadu Government at Panchalankurichi in 1972 stands as a monument to this great hero from the south who played a pivotal role in the freedom movement of our country.

