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UDAYAGIRI FORT AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN THE MILITARY HISTORY OF KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT – A STUDY

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Abstract:

Kanyakumari the far South Western Part of the peninsular India is one among the picturesque landmass of the Indian sub-continent. The early Tamil kings attached great importance to forts, for they served as the base for offensive and defensive operation. Forts means a group of buildings specially created or strengthened for military defence. In the annals of the history of Kanyakumari, Udayagiri fort played an unique role in manufacturing gun-powder and in the administration of the kingdom. The frequent invasions and incursions resulted into the utter devastation of the land which made Maharaja Marthanda Varma (1729-58 A.D) the maker of Modern Travancore to think of granite fortifications in the muddy fort of Udayagiri. Udayagiri was the “principal arsenal of the Travancore Government, with a fine foundry, the only one it is believed in use in India for casting iron guns”. It became a place of tourist interest in the present Kanyakumari district. In this paper an attempt has been made to trace out the importance of Udayagiri fort as a base in the military history of Kanyakumari district.

INTRODUCTION:

Fort means a building or group of buildings specially erected or strengthened for military defence. It is a wealth to a ruler when he attacks his foes. In Tirukkural, Thiruvalluvar describes the necessity and organizations and requirements for an ideal fort in the chapter entitled Aran¹ (fortification). He says “A fort is quite important for the wars of great offence, it is important too for those of fear who see defence”² As V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, has rightly pointed out, “A king without a fort is compared to a snake without poison and an elephant without a rut”³. Fort formed one of the six auxiliaries of royal Paraphernalia⁴. (The auxiliaries were army, subjects, food, ministers, friends and forts). Again it was considered as one of the five fold jewels of a kingdom⁵. (The five fold jewels of a kingdom were absence of disease, wealth, income from land, joy and forts) Kottai, aran, inchī, ahappa and aruppam are the words found in the ancient literature of the Tamils to denote a fort.

The word Udayagiri is a combination of two words, Udaya means 'east' and giri means 'mountain' that is the 'eastern mountain from behind which the sun rises’⁶. Udayagiri was the “principal arsenal of the Travancore Government, with a fine foundry, the only one it is believed in use in India for casting iron guns.”⁷

Udayagiri fort is situated on the main southern road ten miles to the north –east of Nagercoil and thirty three miles from Trivandrum.⁸ The fort is at a distance of half mile from Padmanabhapuram is a well-known landmark in south Travancore⁹. In this paper an attempt has been made to trace out the importance of Udayagiri fort as a base in the military history of South Travancore.

It is believed that Udayagiri was a great military ground to the cheras. The literary and epigraphical evidences prove the burning of this fortress by Raja Raja, the great the contemporary of Bhaskara Raja Varma I. The chola inscriptions refer the storming and capture of the strong fortress sometimes before the year 1008 A.D. In “Muvarula” Ottakuttar explains the real cause behind this invasion. Bhaskara Ravi Varma I imprisoned the chola ambassador in this fort. In order to release him Raja Raja I

crossed eighteen forests and burnt this fort.¹⁰ This Udayagiri fort was called 'Makotai' by A. Sreedhara Menon and he explains that Raja Raja burnt the fort and its surrounding areas¹¹. The Thirukovilur inscription substantiates the storming of Udayagiri fort by Raja Raja I. The places in an around Udayagiri were named Puliyurkurichi, after the Chola emblem. It is even today known in this name¹². The old Makotai regained its stalwart in 1600 A.D. When Vira Ravi Varma (1565 – 1609 A.D) was the Travancore ruler. The construction was first planned and begun in or before the year 776 M.E and at the time it was nothing more than the fort of mud and thatch.¹³

The mud fort of 1601 A.D. received that attention of Maharaja Marthanda Varma. He demolished the old fort and gave birth to it by constructing a granite wall with bastions.¹⁴ The board which stands in front of the ruined church states that, this fort was improved under De Lannoy's supervision from 1741-1744A.D. T.K. Velupillai refused to accept this view. He told that De Lannoy had no role in this venture. Moreover he held the view that the work was completed one year before the capture of De Lannoy that is in 1740 A.D. and Punnahcal Padmanabhan Marthandan supervised the construction work.¹⁵ His opinion proved that his intention was to glorify the natives and not any other reason. The contribution made by De Lannoy was established beyond all doubts in V. Nagam Aiya's 'The Travancore state manual', And P.shungoonny Menon's History of Travancore from the earliest times' and the Travancore Archaeological series.¹⁶

The fort is enclosed in an area of about 84¾ acres of land. It is built round a lofty instead isolated hill of 260 feet of height which affords a panoramic view of the surrounding area. It is constructed of strong and big granite stones which are fifteen feet thick and eighteen feet height including the parapets.¹⁷ The intervals in the walls were used for projecting either artillery or musketry. The outside lining is imbedded with chunam. The inner lining is of rough stone two feet thick and six feet height. The space between inner and outer lining forms ramparts. Besides the main gateway there are three other small inlets near three other bastions. De Lannoy lived in this fort for many years and also died there. On the northern side of the fort, the house in which De Lannoy lived is still in good condition.

As mentioned earlier that Udayagiri was the chief arsenal of the Travancore Government where Maharaja Marthanda Varma established a foundry there and manufactured guns, mortars and cannon balls.¹⁸ For the making of shots iron was imported from a mine in Aramboly. The fort has ten bastions, five of which are intended for cannon, the others being pierced for musketry. Maharaja Ramavarma (1758-1798), the successor of Marthandavarma, paid much attention for producing more arms and ammunitions. His Dewan Kesava Pillai gave fresh impetus to the warlike-store manufactory of Udayagiri and guns and mortars were manufactured with great vigour¹⁹. De Lannoy engaged in getting efficient magazine. From these facts it is very clear beyond doubt that Udayagiri was the most important military station which played a significant role in the military history of the Travancore rulers when Padmanabhapuram was their capital and after wards.

The Udayagiri fort was also used to imprison the political offenders and prisoners of war. Maharaja Marthandavarma put all the twenty four Dutch prisoners of war including De Lannoy and Danodi in the Udayagiri fort.²⁰ Maharaja Rama Varma sent his financial minister Sankara Narayapillay to this fort. He was confined there in the irons for the mal-utilization of public money.²¹

Inside the Udayagiri fort, a Roman catholic church is found in a dilapidated condition. It was built by De Lannoy with the permission of Maharaja Rama Varma. It was used as a place of worship for the foreign Roman Catholics employed in Travancore Army²². The ruins of this small church are still preserved. The tombs of De Lannoy, his son and his wife are found in chronological sequence within the ruined church. Colonel Morrison, the Resident did the best to help the missionary with his military yard "increased the party at Udayagiri with detachments from head-quarters".

The Udayagiri fort contains a beautiful travellers bungalow. It is on the corner of the fort over looking the road. It is a second class bungalow, bedding and food must be taken by the travellers.²³ A watcher is in charge of this bungalow. He is not expected to cook, but he will render such assistance as he can in this matter to travellers.²⁴

The Udayagiri Travellers Bungalow has been under the control of public works Department of Tamil Nadu Government after the Reorganisation of states in 1 November 1956. It is maintained annually by the Government. During 1985-86 the Government sanctioned Rs. 3,000/- for maintenance purpose²⁵. The Government also takes many efforts for attracting tourists. Among them, the important thing is planting saplings inside campus.²⁶ Revised rent rate came into force from 1 April 1988. Accordingly for a single person, the rate is Rs.2/- for every additional member upto a limit of four the rate is rupee one.²⁷

Born in a foreign land De Lannoy guided the martial destinies of Travancore. He was a combination in a remarkable measure of military talents. He served under Maharaja Marthanda Varma and Rama Varma for thirty six years. He was affectionately called by the natives of Travancore as 'valia Kapitan' or Great General²⁸

De Lannoy was born in January 1715 in Holland. He came to India as a captain of the Dutch regiments, when the Dutch held a sort of supremacy in the Malabar coast²⁹. The Dutch power in their zeal to establish a permanent foot on the west coast played one chieftain against the other. They helped the cause of Elayadattus warupam against the Travancore ruler Maharaja Marthanda Varma. They were defeated by the famous battle of Colachel on 31 July 1741 A.D.³⁰

The Travancore army captured 389 muskets, cannons and swords.³¹ They imprisoned twenty – four Europeans and several native Christians. They were put in the fort at Puliyurkurichi.³² Among them De Lannoy and Danadi attracted the attention of Maharaja Marthanda Varma and the former was raised to 'Valia Kapitan'.

De Lannoy served to his royal master faithfully and which resulted in the wide territorial expansion of the state. He was selected to the Maharaja's body-guard. He was entrusted the task of organizing and disciplining the Travancore army. He was also appointed to inspect every garrison and outpost.

De Lannoy repaired many old forts and constructed new batteries and forts with laterite. The forts of Udayagiri, Karuvanoor, Komrakamlalam and Peravom stand to recollect the past memories.³³ Along with Ramayyan Delawah, he conquered and annexed the petty principalities of Attingal, Kayamkulam, Quilon, Ambalapuzha, Kottarakara. These victories extend the Travancore state and Maharaja Marthanda Varma earned the reputation of the maker of Modern Travancore³⁴. The fort at Udayagiri was built under his personal supervision and there he established a foundry for the manufacture of guns, mortars, cannon balls and gun – powder.³⁵ He built the famous Nedumkotta line in central Kerala to prevent the Mysore invasions.³⁶

De Lannoy lost his son in 1765 during the Kalakad Skirmish.³⁷ He died in 1774 A.D. in the Udayagiri fort. He was buried with military pomp in the Udayagiri Church³⁸. It was an irreparable loss to Maharaja Rama Varma. The Latin inscription on his tomb gave a picture of his life. The tomb of De Lannoy in Udayagiri invites the attention of the tourists. Though an alien by birth he fought for Travancore with honour, zeal and dare. This foreign born commander reorganized the Travancore Army on Western lines and made it efficient and up-to-date.³⁹ His sternous services to the state were the silent memories of his name. The Udayagiri fort was a testimony to his memory.

In the military history of Travancore Udayagiri fort proves its significance. The sepoys stationed in the fort. The fall of the forts of Padmanabhapuram and Udayagiri in 1809 A.D. as a result of Velu Thambi rebellion led to the disbandment of military forces in Travancore because British found out a large amount of guns, gun-powder and weapons in those forts. They captured 160 pieces of cannon in Udayagiri and “Occupied the principal arsenal of Ordinance with 1200 barrels of gun-powder were captured from Padmanabhapuram.”⁴⁰

The forts played a significant part in designing the life of the people. They prevented the enemy's attack and thereby gave security to them. In the military history both the army and forts are inseparable. In fact this fort served as a good barrier to the frequent invasions on Kanyakumari and helped the people live in peace and protection.

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