

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The Sethupathis of Ramnad who ruled over the areas of Sethunadu for a period of two centuries from 1605 to 1795 played a significant role in the socio-political, economic and cultural transactions of South India. The territorial segment of Ramnad and Sivaganga regions formed an integral part of the Madurai Nayak kingdom established by Krishna Deva Raya of the Vijayanagara Empire under the command of his general Venkatappa Nayak. During the 16th century, the Nayak rulers of Madurai officially recognized the traditional chieftain of the region who belonged to the Maravar caste as the chieftain of Ramnad; in return, Sadaikka Thevar recognized the sovereignty of the Nayak king over his lands. When the power of the Nayak kings of Madurai began to decline in the late 17th century, the Sethupathis' of Ramnad asserted their independence. In the late 17th century, Raghunatha Kilavan Sethupathi crowned himself the king of Ramnad and shifted his seat from Pogalur to Ramnad close to the east coast. He erected massive fortifications to protect his capital. In 1725, the king of Thanjavur claimed the northern part of the Ramnad kingdom up to the river Pambar in return for his services during the civil war in Ramnad. A vassal of Ramnad who was amongst the victors in the civil war took over the westerly located Sivaganga region, thereby leaving only three-fifths of the kingdom actually in the hands of the king of Ramnad.

The kingdom of the Sethupathis' of Ramnad in the early days formed an integral part of the traditional Marava country. The Marava country included Pudukkottai and portions of the present Tiruchirappalli, Madurai and Thirunelveli districts. The Maravas who are found in large numbers in this area formed an important indigenous tribe. The numerous references to the Maravas are found in the

Sangam works like *Purananuru* and *Silappadhikaram*. It is clear that from very early days they were recognised as a warrior class. The Maravas are referred to in the Sangam literature as warriors and army chiefs. They refer to them as inhabitants of the *palai* (desert, dry) land, one of the five *tinai*s of land described in the Sangam literature.

The territory of the Sethupathis of Ramnad is located between 9 degrees 6' and 10 degrees 6' N latitude and 77 degrees 56' and 79 degrees 19' E longitudes. It encompassed the southern and eastern portion of Madurai district and included the whole Bay of Bengal coast of the district. It has an area of 2,104 square miles (5,450 km) and had a population of 723,886 in 1901. It was one of the largest and most populous zamindari estates in the Madras Presidency.

Rameshwaram Island situated in between Adam's Bridge and a narrow strip of land on the mainland is a low and a sandy region dressed with scrub and stunted bushes and coconut palms. The Hindu holy island city of Rameshwaram, from where; legend has said that Sri Rama launched his invasion of Ravana's Srilanka. On the conclusion of the war and Rama's success in it, he appointed a Sethupathi or "lord of the bridge" to guard the island. The "bridge" referred to here is the legendary Adam's Bridge or Rama's Bridge which was believed to have been constructed by Sri Rama. The Maravar chieftains of Ramnad were entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the bridge, hence the appellation. Adam's Bridge is a narrow bridge of sand and rocks mostly dry which connected Mannar Island with Rameshwaram Island. It is mostly composed of shifting of sand banks, with intricate channels between them. Adam's Bridge separates Ceylon from India.

The term Ramnad traces its origin from the Ramanathaswamy temple in Rameshwaram. It is believed that Sri Rama carried out the construction of the Rama

Sethu Bridge with the support of his followers to cross the ocean in his conflict against Ravana, the ruler of Srilanka. There after Sri Rama consecrated a temple at Rameshwaram for the worship of Lord Siva to expiate the sin of *brahmahathi dosam* in slaying Ravana and left the the protection of the pilgrims and the temple under hereditary charge of the Maravar chieftains of the region. Lord Rama's faithful servant, Guha built a town near the Rama Sethu. The town was called Mugavainagaram. Sethupathis acted as the guardian of the Isthmus (Ramasethu). So the rulers were called as Sethupathis. Then the town appears to have been very near the sea and even now it is occasionally referred to as Mugavai. This town was later known as Ramanathapuram.

The Palk Strait of the Bay of Bengal and the Gulf of Mannar form the eastern and south-eastern boundaries of the region. The Gulf of Mannar is a portion of the Indian Ocean lying between the eastern coast of Ceylon and western coast of Madras. The Pamban River forms the common boundary between the Ramnad region and the Thanjavur region on the north-eastern side. The Periar forms the common boundary on the north-western side between the Srivilliputtur forests of the region and the Sattur and Gandamanaickanur forests of the Madurai region. The Devar forms the common boundary on the south -western side between the Seithur forests and the Sivagiri forests of the Thirunelveli region. The Ramnad region is bounded on the north by Sivaganga, Pudukottai and Thanjavur on the east by Palk's Strait; on the south by Gulf of Mannar and Thirunelveli District; and on the west by Sivaganga, Thirumunagalum Taluk of the Madurai District and also by the Thirunelveli District.

It was subdivided into five zamindari tehsils: Ramnad, Tiruvadanaï, Paramakudi, Tiruchuli and Mudukulathur. The administration was based in the town of Ramanathapuram in Ramnad tehsil. Ramanathapuram, Kilakkarai, Paramakudi,

Rameshwaram, Mandapam and Pamban were some of the important towns of the Sethupathis of Ramnad.

The Sethupathis of Ramnad hailed from the Mukkulathor community. They were popularly treated as Thevar and Devas. They commanded the most prominent and significant position in the Maravar Country. The Mukkulathor community comprises of the Agamudayar, Kallar and Maravar social groups that share a common myth of origin and claim to have once been members of various ancient South Indian dynasties. The term *Thevar* "literally means celestial beings or divine-natured people" and *Mukkulathor* means "three clans united together". The three constituent communities were Agamudayar, Kallar and Maravar. The three groups traditionally each believed themselves to be superior to their fellow Mukkulathors.

The Maravars who formed the chief inhabitants of the Sethupathi region and perhaps the oldest caste in the country and four or five hundred years ago they must have been by far the most numerous, as they were undoubtedly the most powerful of all the castes in the Pandya country. History shows clearly that the kings of Ramnad in the seventeenth century held a very respectable position amongst the sovereigns of the south.

The Sethupathis of Ramnad and the Rajas of Sivagangai trace their origin from among the Maravas. In olden times they were regarded as a fierce and a turbulent race and became the terror of their neighbours. They followed an uncompromising attitude against their enemies and usually they remained grateful and sincere to their well wishers.

They were very resolute in their decisions. At times they fell prey in the hands of the crafty and the dubious sections and even went to the extent of fighting and killing their fellow men who hailed from the lower strata of the society.

Muthukrishnappa Nayak became instrumental in restoring the Marava territory to the ancient line of Sethupathi in 1605. He is credited with the foundation of the dynasty of the Sethupathi of Ramnad. They were given the Marava country on condition that they should suppress crime and protect the pilgrims going to Rameshwaram from the burglars and bandits of that wild and inhospitable region. They had their own tribal leaders under whom they served as kings. By virtue of their military prowess they became turbulent and powerful. The Marava chieftains were absorbed into the prevailing feudal structure. They were given land rights with the condition of wartime contributions. They were noted for their military powers. They lived by serving as soldiers in the army and at times by plunder.

Maravars were divided into seven endogamous groups namely Sembu Nattu Maravars, Kondayan Kottai Maravars, Appanurnadu Maravars, Agata Maravars, Oriyar Maravars, Uppu Kottai Maravars and Kuruchi Kattu Maravars. The Sethupathi hailed from the Sembu Nattu Maravar branches. There were Marikka Kilai, Picchakilai, Tondaman Kilai, Sitrama Kilai, Thanicha Kilai, Karuputhura Kilai, Katra Kilai sub sects among the Sembu Nattu Maravars.

The Sethupathis, the guardian of the Cape of Rameshwaram became the rulers of the Sethu Nadu. The protector of Sethusamudram was called as Sethupathi. Sadaikka Thevar was a loyal subordinate of the Nayaks. He emerged as the chief of the poligars. They had Ramnad as their official headquarters. Sadaikka Thevar and his son Koothan Sethupathi acted as Sethupathis and extended protection to the pilgrims who visited Rameshwaram. Apart from giving protection two Sethupathis did religious services to the Ramanathaswamy temple at Rameshwaram.

Koothan Sethupathi made his adopted son Sadaikka Thevar II as the next ruler. This was opposed by Koothan Sethupathi's natural son Thambi, Thirumalai Nayak

supported the claim of Thambi. The ruler Sadaikka Thevar was dethroned and jailed. Thambi was made as Sethupathi. Thambi was not competent. SadaikkaThevar's nephews Raghunatha Thevar and Narayana Thevar rebelled against Thambi's rule. Accepting the popular representation, Thirumalai Nayak released Sadaikka Thevar from jail and made him Sethupathi after dismissing Thambi from the throne. Sadiakka Thevar constructed a new Chokkanatha temple at Rameshwaram. He did lot of charitable and public works.

Raghunatha Sethupathi (1647 AD to 1672 AD) was loyal to the Nayak ruler. He helped the Nayaks by defeating the Muslims under Kutb Khan and the poligar of Ettapuram. In appreciation of the help the Nayak ruler gave the privilege of celebrating Navarathri festival at the capital city. The Nayak ruler also donated places like Thirubhuvanam, Mannar Koil and Tiruchuli to Sethupathi. He successfully annexed Devakottai and Aranthangi. He helped Thirumalai Nayak in his war against Mysore army. Thirumalai Nayak recognized the valuable military services of Raghunatha Sethupathi and conferred the title 'Thirumalai Sethupathi' on him. Sethupathi's loyalty towards the Nayaks was over with Thirumalai Nayak.

Raghunatha Sethupathi recaptured all the forts and places from the Nayaks and became an independent ruler. Raghunatha Sethupathi patronized art and literature. He made Tamil and Telugu as official languages of his court. He encouraged Tamil poets namely Alagiya Chitramabala Kavirayar and Amirtha Kavirayar. He constructed the Second *praharam* (outer courtyard) of the Ramanathaswami temple in Rameshwaram. The famous poet Thayumanavar spent his last days under the patronage of Raghunatha Sethupathi. After Raghunatha Sethupathi both Surya Thevar and Athana Thevar were in power for a very short duration in 1674.

Kilavan Sethupathi (1674 AD to 1710 AD) was the greatest ruler among the Marava kings. He was the seventh king of Ramnad. He was helpful to Chokkanatha Nayak. The Nayak king conferred him a title Para Rajakesari (Lion to alien kings). He annexed some territories of Madurai Kingdom that included Aranthangi, Thirumayam and Piranmalai. He opposed the spread of Christian missionary activities. Kilavan Sethupathi liberated the Marava country from the control of Madurai Nayak. After defeating Rani Mangammal's army, he declared independence of the Marava country in 1707. He shifted his headquarters from Pugalur to Ramnad. Kilavan Sethupathi established the Nalukottai palayam (later Sivaganga) and appointed Udaya Thevar as governor. He served well for the development of Hinduism. He endowed villages to a temple at Thiruvadanaï and Kalaiyar Koil. He constructed a fort around the Ramanathapuram, the capital city. He constructed a dam across the Vaigai. His rule was marked as the golden age of the Maravas. Kilavan Sethupathi was succeeded by Bhavani Shankara Thevar and Thanda Thevar.

Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi became the 8th King of Ramnad in 1710 after the death of Kilavan Sethupathi. After Kilavan Sethupathi the kingdom was divided into two and the Sivaganga kingdom emerged. Chand Sahib of Carnatic, captured Ramanathapuram and in 1741, the area came under the control of the Marathas and then under the Nizam in 1744 AD. The rule of the Nawabs made displeasure in the mind of those chieftains and thus they declared the last Nayak as ruler of Pandya Mandalam against the Nawab in 1752 AD. By that time, throne of Carnatic had two rivals, Mohamed Ali and Chanda Sahib, and Ramanathapuram was part of Carnatic. The British and the French supported Mohamed Ali and Chanda Sahib respectively and thus resulted in a series of conflicts in the southern part of the continent.

Ramnad participated in the Carnatic wars between the British and the French East India companies. The state came under British influence in the 1790s and the king of Ramnad was deposed in 1795 under the pretext of misrule. The British, then, made the king's sister the ruler of Ramnad and reduced the kingdom to a zamindari by a permanent sanad (grant) in 1803. Since then, until the India's independence in 1947, Ramnad was ruled by the queen and her descendants.

Objectives of the Study

1. To unfold the contributions of the Sethupathis of Ramnad in the socio-economic, political and cultural history of South India. The Sethupathis of Ramnad who hailed from the Mukkulathor community were treated as Thevar and they commanded the most prominent and significant position.
2. To analyse the social predominance of the Maravas as the sons of the soil. The Mukkulathor community which comprised of the Agamudayar, Kallar and Maravar communities played the most decisive role in the socio-political transactions of Ramnad.
3. To assess the standard of the economic life of the Sethupathis of Ramnad in the context of agriculture and trade. The Sethupathis initiated a series of measures that were calculated to ensure the welfare and betterment of their people.
4. To estimate the nature of cultural attainments even in the midst of their trials and tribulations. The temple art, architecture, sculpture, painting, fairs and festivals and the social habits like the food, dress, family, cosmetics, ornaments and the socio-religious practices like Sati and Devadasi System received the special attention of the Sethupathis of Ramnad.

Hypotheses of the Study

1. Among the hundreds of poligar chieftains the Sethupathis of Ramnad occupied a unique place in the history of South India by virtue of their heroism, sincerity and spirit of dedication. The poligari system and the Sethupathis of Ramnad gathered momentum from the ruins of the Vijayanagara Empire.
2. The social structure the Sethupathis of Ramnad remained feudal oriented and caste ridden. The society which once remained cosmopolitan and universal in its outlook were broadly divided into caste Hindus and non-caste Hindus.
3. The non-caste Hindus were subjected to severe disabilities and restrictions. At times Ramnad became the venue of terrible conflicts and confrontations among non-caste Hindu communities like the Maravas and the Nadars.
4. In the realm of culture the Sethupathis of Ramnad made certain everlasting contributions in the form of temple art, architecture, sculpture, painting, fairs and festivals besides the social habits like the food, dress, family, cosmetics and ornaments. Their attitude to the practices of Sati and Devadasi System deserve the special attention.

Review of the Sources

A few noted works have already been done on Ramnad and Sethupathis. **The history of the Sethupathis** of Ramnad by Natarajan an M.Litt thesis work on Natarajan in 1953 covered the political history of the Sethupathis. Thiruvengkatachari in 1959 is a minor work dealing with certain political aspects. S.Kathirvel works on **history of maravas** worth mentioning source on the political history of Sethupathis of Eighteenth century and their opposition against the british. Though the work is very strong in the political aspect of sethupathis. Seshadri's work on **The sethupathis of**

ramnad an unpublished Ph.D., work mentioned about the political history 1605Ad to 1967.

In this thesis the political social and cultural aspects have been analysed but not in detail. **Society under the sethupathis of ramnad** is another research work done by Sabapathy. It deals with only society under the sethupathis. Leslie Thiagakumar's work on **history of ramnad socio economic and cultural perspectives (AD 1803 – 1949)**. This work has not included the seventeenth and eighteenth century. However, as the sethupathis period was very long a detailed account has not yet been brought out so far. So it is felt that a study of "**soico – Economic and Cultural contributions of Sethupathis in Ramnad**" from 1605 to 1795 AD is worth the effort and hence this present attempt.

This thesis is mainly based on primary as well as secondary sources. The primary sources are classified in to the archival sources like political consultations, foreign secret consultations, proceeding, military country correspondence, military consultation, government orders, also give more information about the sethupathis political condition. Archaeological survey of India's annual report on Indian Epigraphy, sethupathis copper plates and V.Rangacharya records of A Topographical list of the inscriptions more useful sources to social and cultural contribution.

The secondary sources consist of the district Gazetteers, manuals and the published works of several of authors, V. Kanakasabhai **The Tamils Eighteen Hundred years ago**, K.Rajayyan **Administration and society in the Carnatic 1701-1801**. K.K. Pillay **Social history of the Tamils** Edgar Thurston and Rengachari **Cast and tribes of South India**, Raju kalidos, **History and culture of Tamil's** K.K.Pillai **Tamilaga varalarum Makkal Panpadum**. S.M.Kamal "Sethupathi Mannar Varalaru", S.K.Kamal **Sethupathi Mannar Seppedugal**", R. Sathyanatha Aiyar

History of the Nayaks of Madura. T.V.Mahalingam **South Indian Polity**, M.T.Karunakaran **A Copper coin in the name of sethupathi**, Madras Coin society special bulletin. Ramanathapuram palace museum guide, Mee Manoharan **Kilavan Sethupathi**, S.Arasarethinam, **Merchants companies and commerce on the coramantal coast 1650 – 1740**, supply more information to provides to my research work **socio-economic and cultural contributions of sethupathi's**.

Methodology

The present thesis has mostly adopted descriptive as well as analytical methods to form the concepts with the help of both primary and secondary sources. The chapter on Historical milieu of Ramnad and Political condition of ramnad region have exclusively followed the descriptive method by using the data collected from archaeological, epigraphical, district gazetteer, district manual, manuscripts and Archive sources. The chapter on Socio and Economic Conditions under the Sethupathis and Cultural Contributions of the Sethupathis have adopted analytical method in classifying the data from the primary as well as secondary sources.

Limitation

This research area of the title limited from 1605 to 1795 AD.

Design of the Study

The introductory part of the study is designed to define the scope, relevance, objectives, hypotheses, review of the sources, methodology and the design of the study besides the importance of the area of investigation.

The first chapter titled the historical milieu explains the history of the study area through the ages. It commands a hoary past right from the pre historic days. The presence of certain quartzites of stone instruments from the Ramanad area traces its

history from the paleolithic period. The continued presence of the neolithic and the megalithic periods were substantiated by the monuments including quartz gravel. Thereafter Ramnad remained an integral part of ancient Tamilakam. The Sangam literature finds plenty of references about the people of Ramnad especially about the Maravas. It remained one among the five tinais known as Palai with its Maravar warrior chieftains. During the days Aaryanisation Ramnad assumed greater importance through Sri Rama on his way to Sri Lanka to restore his spouse Sita from the custody of Ravana with the support of the local people of Ramand. The chapter further proceeds into the fortunes and misfortunes of Ramnad under the Pandyas, Cholas, Cheras, Kalabhras, Pallavas, Vijayanagara, Nayaka, the Nawabs of Carnatic, the Marathas, the Poligars and the external powers like the Sultanate of Delhi, Sri Lanka, Portuguese, Dutch, French and the English.

The second chapter on the political condition of the Sethupathis undertakes a comprehensive study of the career of Sadaikka Thevar alias udaiyan Sethupathi (1605 - 1621), Koothan Sethupathi (1621-1635), Dalavoy Sethupathi alias Sadaika Thevar II (1635-1646), Raghunatha Thevar alias Thirumalai Sethupathi (1647-1672), Rajasurya Sethupathi (1674), Raghunatha Sethupathi alias Kilavan Sethupathi (1674–1710), Thiru Udaya Thevar alias Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi (1710–1725), Sundareswara Raghunatha Sethupathi alais Thanda Thevar (1726), Bhavani sankara Sethupathi (1726 – 1729), Kattaya Thevar alias Kumara Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi (1729-1735), Siva kumara Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi (1735-1748), Sethupathi Rakka Thevar (1748-1749), Sella Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi (1749 - 1763), Muthuramalinga Sethupathi (1763-1772 and 1782-1795) and Mangaleswari Nachiyar (1795-1803) under the British paramountcy. It harps upon their contacts with Vijayanagara and Nayaka and the external powers like the

Portuguese, Dutch, French and the English besides the neighbouring powers like the Sultans of Mysore, the Nawab of Arcot, the Raja of Thanjavur, the ruler of Pudukottai and other poligari chieftains of the period.

The third chapter on the social contribution sheds light on the social formations under the Sethupathis of Ramnad. Ramnad remained the citadel of the Maravas right from the days of the Sangam Age. The people in Ramnad as elsewhere in ancient Tamilakam were familiar with an occupational division of the society and were not accustomed to the traditional fourfold classification of society or *chaturvarna* system. The society in the Sethupathi region was broadly based on caste system. It was divided into Brahmin and non-Brahmin communities. The higher castes like the Brahmanas, Vellalars or Pillais and the Mukkulathor people were socially, communicably, and politically more privileged. The Sethupathis of Ramnad hailed from the Mukkulathor community. They were treated as Thevar and commanded the most prominent and significant position. The Mukkulathor community which comprised of the Agamudayar, Kallar and Maravar communities played the most decisive role in the socio-political transactions of Ramnad. The Nadars, Manjaputha Chettiyars, Nattukottai Chettiyar, Vaniya Chettiyars and the Comati Chettiyar formed the emerging communities of the Sethunadu. Nattambadians or Uddaiyans, Pattunulkarar or Sowrashtra, Kavaras and Vadugas Kavarei, Reddies, Thottians or Kambalathar, Rajus, Kammalars, Keikolans, Saliyans, Saluppans also contributed their share to betterment of Ramnad. The scheduled castes like the Pallars, Parayars, Chakkiliars, Fisherman or Paravars, Vannan, Puthara Vannan, Ambattans, Kusavan, Semman and Melakaran as the sons of soil constituted an important segment in the social fabric of Ramnad. Similarly the chapter delves into the services of the major religions like Hinduism, Islam and Christianity besides the

role of Jainism. Sati and Devadasi System were popular among the Sethupathis region.

The fourth chapter on the economic condition of the Sethupathis explains the economic life of the people with particular reference to their resources, means and standard of existence. Agriculture and trade were considered as the major factors that decided the economy. The Sethupathis initiated a series of measures for the welfare and betterment of their people. The system of taxation was not arbitrary. They carried out systematic survey, issued coins and promoted trade. Lands belonging to charities and Dharmasasanams including Mutt lands, Jeevathana lands, Temple lands and lands belonging to mosques or churches were exempted from taxation. The commercial transactions both internal and external trade assumed greater importance by virtue of the goods such as clove, cardamom, jathikkai, jathipathiri, copper, lead, pannier and other kinds of cents or deodorant, sheets, elephants, horses, tobacco, camphor and the glass, betel nut, types of coir, coconut, soap nut and chukka. Tamarind imported from Ceylon, betal nut is mainly imported from Keelakkarai which became the international harbour of Sethu Nadu where business men of Arabia, China, and other European countries gathered to participate in the trade transactions. The chapter unfolds the commercial fortunes of Sethu Nadu in the context of the commercial prosperity of the region.

The fifth chapter on the cultural contributions traces of the cultural excellence of the Sethupathis with particular reference to their contributions in the field of temple art, architecture, sculpture, painting, fairs and festivals. The social habits like the food, dress, family, cosmetics and ornaments have been dealt in a detailed manner. The family, amusements like music and marriage received the special attention of the Sethupathis. Such social customs and practices are dealt in detail.

The concluding part of the study discusses the major findings of the study. It sum-up the contributions of the Sethupathis to the political, social, economic and cultural history of South India. It was mostly left unnoticed by the historians and scholars. The present scholar has made a humble attempt to fill up such a historical vacuum. Though the scholar has succeeded to consult almost all the sources pertaining to the topic of research, a Select Bibliography is provided by confining within the sources documented in the thesis in order to make the study more authentic and original. Since the meaning of the non-English terms have been furnished in the respective places, a separate glossary as not been provided.