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Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja, The Lion Of Kerala, who had humbled Hyder Ali, Tipu Sultan and the British in his lifetime, a truly great warrior. Also referred to as Cotiote Rajah and Pychy Rajah, one of the earliest revolutionary warriors of India, much before the 1857 Mutiny.



Born on January 3, 1753 in the lush, green, hilly ranges of Malabar, Pazhassi Raja knew the terrain like the back of his hand, and spent time, mobilizing the people there against the invaders, first the Mysore kingdom and later the British.

When one looks at Pazhassi Raja's history of resistance, it can be broadly be divided into three phases, first one against Hyder Ali from 1773-82, then against Tipu Sultan from 1784 to 1793 and finally the British till his death in 1805.

Hyder Ali, the ruler of Mysore had invaded the Malabar much earlier in 1766, at the behest of the Rajah of Kannur, who wanted independence from the Zamorin of Kozhikode. A long campaign later, Hyder reached Kozhikode, where the Zamorin was forced to surrender, and pay taxes.

Considering he knew the hilly terrains of Wynad well, Pazhassi was at advantage as he began to harass the enemy through a series of ambushes. Soon Pazhassi's fame spread far and wide, and he became one of the most powerful figure head of Kottayam kingdom.

This however aroused the envy of his scheming uncle Vira Varma, jealous of Pazhassi's rising popularity. He began to play a series of power games with his nephew, leading to a long standing enmity between both of them.

In the meantime the Coorg rulers too joined hands with Hyder Ali, who had promised them Wynad. Hyder reinstated the Raja of Chirakkal, and soon a triple alliance was formed with Mysore to crush Pazhassi Raja.

Pazhassi Raja in turn regularly raided, Mysore, taking the sandalwood from it's forests, and laid claim to large parts of the kingdom right up to Nanjanagud. Apart from attacking the Rajahs of Coorg and Northern Malabar.

Pazhassi ensured he had a close alliance with Ravi Varma, the prince of Kozhikode and Krishna Varma, the rebel leader of Southern Malabar. Thalaserry was of vital importance to the British East India Company, being a harbor, fort as well as a a manufacturing center.

Taking control of Thalaserry meant a major effect on the British naval presence in the West Coast. It would also affect the flow of arms and ammunition to the anti Mysore rebels in the Malabar region.

Keeping in mind the strategic importance, Hyder Ali, decided to capture the fort, which would hit both the British as well as the rebels. His ally, the Chirakkal Raja, besieged Thalaserry, and enforced an economic blockade on his orders.

The Chirakkal forces were pursued by Pazhassi Raja's men right up to Kottayam, where the Mysore occupying forces were routed too. However just at a critical juncture, when the entire Mysorean army could have been wiped out from Malabar, the British were ordered to go slow.

This worked to the advantage of Mysore, and soon a joint Mysore- Chirakkal army led by the Rajah, attacked Kottayam. Inspite of a brave resistance, Pazhassi Rajah's army had to retreat, and soon the combined army captured Kadathanad, installing a puppet Rajah.

Sardar Khan, the Mysore General, opened negotiations with Pazhassi Raja, and offered to restore the territories occupied by Mysore, if Pazhassi accepted their sovereignty and pay a tribute of 50,000 rupees.

However Khan got greedy, raised the tribute amount and Pazhassi had no option but to fight back again. In the mean time, the Kottayam forces captured Kalpetta in Wynad, where a 2000 strong Coorg army was ambushed and wiped out.

By 1780, Pazhassi allied with the British, and broke the siege of Thalaserry by striking from both ends. As per plan, the British came out of the fort and attacked the Mysorean army , while Pazhassi attacked from the rear.

It was a total rout for Mysore, Sardar Khan was killed, and the forces had to retreat from Malabar. Though Kotttayam became free, the British once again ceded Malabar to Tipu Sultan as per the Treaty of Mangalore in 1784.

Pazhassi's brother Ravi Varma, agreed to pay the rather exorbitant tribute to Mysore, which meant greater hardship for the peasants. What angered Pazhassi even more, was that his brother also ceded Waynad to Tipu Sultan.

He swore not to let Tipu enjoy in peace, and soon rebelled against his own brother and Mysore once more. For close to seven years, Pazhassi's guerilla forces constantly harassed the Mysorean army in Wynad's hilly terrain

A furious Tipu sent an army under the French general Lally, to exterminate the entire Nair community from Kottayam to Palakkad. However the war in Deccan, meant Tipu had to divert his attention elsewhere, leaving Pazhassi with a free hand to attack.

Katirur near Talassery was recaptured, as was the Kuttiyadi fort and soon the whole of Kottayam was out of Tipu's control. However after the Treaty of Srirangapatnam, Malabar this time was ceded to the British, who began to establish their supremacy there.

The British put the following terms to the Rajahs of Malabar, in 1792, once it passed into their rule.
The British would control the Rajah, in case he oppressed the people.
A British resident would look into complaints of oppression.

Two British persons would assist the Rajah's men in making land revenue valuation.
British share of pepper to be delivered at a fixed price.

What this effectively meant was that the rulers of Malabar were just agents of the British, stripped off all powers effectively. And this humiliating treaty was ratified by Pazhassi's uncle Vira Varma.

This began the final phase of Pazhassi Raja's struggle from 1793 till his death in 1805. In what was called as the Cotiote War, Pazhassi fought the British, over Kottayam and Waynad.

By 1793, Pazhassi's wily uncle Vira Varma was made ruler of Kottayam, the British feared Pazhassi was too independent. Pazhassi felt betrayed, as he was the only Malabar ruler who assisted the British against Mysore when all others had fled to Travancore.

Vira Varma played a double game, collecting taxes, and instigating Pazhassi against the British for his own ends. The harsh methods adopted by the British to extract taxes from the peasants, meant Pazhassi had to once again revolt against them.

Pazhassi ensure no tax was collected by the British in the entire Kottayam kingdom, and threatened the British that their pepper vines would be destroyed too. The British discovering Vira Varma's double games, tricked Pazhassi into believing he would be given a share

Vira Varma found it hard to collect the tax, with his nephew stubbornly resisting him. In 1796, the British sent a large force to arrest Pazhassi, who by that time itself, fled to Manatanna. Pazhassi's ancestral palace was looted by the British Lieutenant James Gordon.

Also one of his former generals Pazhayamviden Chandu too joined hands with the British betraying Pazhassi. Soon he , began to operate out of the Purali range, blocking all British communications between Low Malabar and Wayanad through the Kuttiyadi Pass.

Pazhassi communicated to the British, through an old friend Colonel Dow of his, that he was willing to negotiate with them, to avoid needless bloodshed. The British too were willing to negotiate, as they feared Pazhassi might ally with Tipu if pushed too far

However Pazhassi's uncle Vira Varma, played spoilsport, ensuring that the British communication did not reach his nephew, as he had a vested interest here. Varma also removed Kaitheri Ambu, a favorite general of Pazhassi from the Kottayam administration.

The British now sided with Vira Varma, and refused to accede to Pazhassi's request, that Kottayam be under his rule. In the meantime Ambu, began to plan a mass resistance against the forcible tax collection by the Vira Varma.

Add to it a large number of Vira Varma's troops too deserted him and joined Pazhassi's side. By early 1797, Nair milita began to rise all over the Malabar in support of Pazhassi.

Earlier he visited the Mysore commandant at Karkankotta and met Tipu too, who promised him support. The British sent a large force to arrest Pazhassi, outposts were set up all over Wynad and Kottayam.

However Pazhassi had got wind of the plans already. He laid a trap for them, ordering his troops to be concealed in stockades, on both sides of the pass. As soon as the British forces entered the Periya Pass, the troops ambushed them, it was a massacre all the way.

Had not Major Anderson's force arrived in time, the entire British unit would have been wiped out. Major Cameroon himself was killed in the ambush, along with Lieutnants Nugent, Madge, Rudderman, it was a total rout.

Furious at the rout, the British struck back, through Swaminatha Pattar, a Tamil Brahmin, who served as the minister to the Zamorin. They raised a band of irregulars to attack Pazhassi, which later became the notorious Kolkar, that acted as stooges to the British.

Understanding the fact that the British did not have much chance with Pazhassi in a guerilla war in the hilly terrains of Wynad, they decided to make peace with him. There was also a fear, that Pazhassi might side with the French, so they felt it best to come to terms with him.

Finally a peace pact was signed between Pazhassi Raja and British in 1797, brokered by the Rajas of Chirakkal and Parappanad. As per the treaty, Pazhassi would be pardoned, his property would be returned, and his elder brother Ravi Varma would be the head of Kottayam.

With Tipu's fall, many of the ex Pathan soldiers of his army too joined Pazhassi. Sir Arthur Wellesley was appointed as the Army Commandant of Mysore, Canara and Malabar. Wellesely began to build roads in the Wayanad region, and outposts to subdue the rebels.

When Wellesley left for the Deccan, Pazhassi, marched across the Kutiyadi Pass, and formed an alliance with Unni Mootha Moopan, a Mapilla leader from Wayanad. Soon other nobles like Kampurat Nambiar of Iruvazhinad, Peruval Nambiar, Sankaran Nambiar too joined him.

By 1800, the entire Kottayam countryside was controlled by the rebels, forcing Wellesley to send a large force under Colonel Sartorius to recapture Kottayam. However shortage of troops meant the plan ended in failure.

With contacts cut off with Southern Malabar, Pazhassi decided to go underground with his followers, who were 6 close aides and around 25 musketeers. Pazhassi moved from forest to forest evading capture, visiting his secret bases in Kottayam, Kadathanand and Kurumbranand forests.

The British struck back through a reign of terror, targeting nobles sympathetic to Pazhassi. Peruval Nambiar was hanged from a tree, and those nobles who supported Pazhassi, were threatened with brutal confiscation of properties.

Another supporter Kannatvath Sankaran Nambiar too was arrested and hanged in public. Once again the Malabar was on fire, as the people revolted against the draconian British acts.

Panamaram fort was captured by Edachena Kungan Nair, with around 150 Kurichia archers led by Talakkal Chandu. The garrison under Captain Dickenson was slaughtered along with himself, the rebels got hold of 112 muskets and a whole lot of ammunition, while destroying the fort.

Edachena ambushed the British forces en route to Mysore from Mananthavadi, however a reinforcement arrived just in time, that outflanked the rebels and most of them were massacred.

It was an uphill task for the British, the people of Kottayam sided with the rebels, and soon the revolt spread to Chirakkal, where the rebels began to attack the British forces. By the end of 1803, Pazhassi's army had spread as far as Kannur and Thalassery.

Kozhikode was attacked, the prisoners in the sub jail were released, and Wellesley had to leave in failure after 3 unsuccessful years. It took a civil servant Thomas Baber, the Sub Collector, to finally crush Pazhassi's revolt

A huge uprising by Kalayat Nambiar was put down in 1804, in the largely forested eastern Chirakkal region. It was also the time the Kolkar came into picture, serving their British masters.

The British offered a bounty of 3000 pagodas for Pazhassi Raja's capture, along with 1000 for Edachena Kungan. However once again the monsoon and Wynad's climate meant, Pazhassi had an advantage once again.

Pazhassi along with Edachena, organized a large force of Kurumbas and Kurichias, along with the Nair nobles of Wayanad. The Kolkar were devastated by the Wyanad climate, most of them were not used to it.

The British were finally able to capture Pazhassi after a local Chetti, informed them of his location. On 1805, 30 November, Pazhassi Raja was ambushed by the British at the Karnataka border on a stream called Mavilla Tod.

In a fiercely fought encounter, Pazhassi was killed, bringing to an end, one of the fiercest revolutionary fighters ever. Pazhassi Raja was no more, but for close to a decade, he gave one of the toughest resistances to the British.

A Man who humbled Hyder Ali, Tipu Sultan and Arthur Wellesley finally fell to betrayal and capture, a true hero and a legend. Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja, the Lion of Kerala, true legend.

And thanks all for patiently following this longish thread of mine on Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja, the Lion of Kerala, who humbled Hyder Ali, Tipu Sultan, and gave the British one of their toughest challenges ever.

The 2009 Malayalam biopic with Mamooty in the lead role, and a supporting cast of Sarath Kumar, Thilakan, Suman, Padmapriya is worth a watch. Has an excellent soundtrack too by maestro Illayaraja.
https://t.co/AjONBSIW1i

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