

THE RULING HOUSE OF TRAVANCORE

A PEEP INTO THE HISTORIC PAST

THE Ruling House of Travancore traces its descent from the ancient Chera dynasty of Southern India, who with the Pandyas and the Cholas, ruled over Tamilakam (Tamilnad) extending from the Tiruppati Hill in the north to Cape Comorin in the South, and from sea to sea in the West and East.

The Cheras were foremost among the three and achieved undying fame as great conquerors, staunch upholders of Indian ideals and munificent patrons of Aryan and Dravidian culture. The Pandya and Chola dynasties became extinct long ago; but the Cheras survive in the two ruling families of Travancore and Cochin.

Early Beginnings

In the early centuries of the Christian era, representatives of the Chera House settled down in Quilon, resisted the frequent incursions of the Pandyas and developed the trade and commerce of that part. It was this Quilon branch that founded the Quilon era in 825 A. D., after its victory over the Pandyas at the battle of Karaikottai in 791 A. D. And it is from this branch of the Cheras that the rulers of Travancore claim descent.

The territory over which the Cheras of Quilon originally held sway was known as Kupakakhandam and extended from Cape Comorin to Kanetti in Central Travancore; before long the frontier was pushed further north to Tiruvalla.

In 885 Ayyanatika! Thiruvati, the then king of Quilon, granted certain concessions to a Church erected at Quilon by the foreign Christian merchant, Maruval Safir Iso, as seen from the Syrian Christian Copper plates now preserved in Kottayam. In course of time the Quilon dynasty became divided into two branches, the one at Quilon being known as Jayasimhanad and the other which for political reasons established itself at Kalkulam in South Travancore, being called Chiravay.

Ravi Varma Kulasekhara

Ravi Varma Kulasekhara, surnamed Sangramadhira or "dauntless in war", was a great conqueror. He was born in 1266. Soon after assuming the reins of Government he conquered the whole of Kerala, subdued the Pandya and Chola kings, and in 1312-13 crowned himself Emperor of the whole of South India, in the ancient city of Kanchipuram. Several of his inscriptions have been discovered there, at Srirangam in Trichinopoly, Panrutti in Cuddalore, and at Poonamallee in Madras.

In The Portuguese Period

Although, after the death of Sangramadhira, most of the territories conquered by him were lost to Travancore, the whole of Tinnevely District remained with her. Numerous inscriptions of Travancore rulers are found scattered all over that area.

When the Portuguese arrived in Kerala in 1498, Travancore was the most important principality of the Malabar Coast. De Barros, the Portuguese historian, writes: "The Portuguese on their arrival found Travancore a powerful kingdom, the king of which our people call REY GRANDI, because he is greater in his dominions and the State he keeps than those of the other princes of Malabar". Rama Martanda Varma, who ruled from 1500, to 1535, was a distinguished sovereign, and eloquent testimony to his greatness is borne by the Italian traveller Ludovico Varthema (1510) and the Portuguese traveller Duarte Barbosa (1514). St. Francis Xavier, in one of his letters dated 1544, describes the then ruler as "the great king of Travancore."

English East India Company

The earliest settlement of the English East India Company in Kerala was Vizhinjam, an old sea port to the south of Trivandrum, which had attained great celebrity between the 8th and 12th centuries A. D. The Company was granted permission to erect a factory here, sometime about 1644. Later the Company was allowed to construct another factory at Valiatura and in 1684 a fort at Anjengo. In 1723 a treaty was concluded between the ruler of Travancore and the Company, in which it was laid down that "the Government of Travancore will be in league and united in good friendship with the Honourable Company." Travancore was thus one of the first Indian States to enter into treaty relationship with the East India Company.

Maharaja Martanda Varma

At the beginning of the 18th century Travancore had the good fortune of having as its ruler Maharaja Martanda Varma

appropriately surnamed the Great. He reigned over Travancore from 1729 to 1758. Maharaja Visakham Tirunal, one of his illustrious successors, describes him as "one of those whom the world produces but at rare intervals. He was born to command and conquer." Martanda Varma, soon after his accession to the throne, added Attingal to Travancore, conquered the principalities of Quilon, Kayamkulam, Ambalapuzha, Thekkumkur and Vadakkumkur, inflicted a crushing defeat on the Netherlands East India Company at Colachel and compelled them to conclude a treaty with him at Mavelikara which tolled the death-knell of their power and influence on the Malabar Coast. The ruler of Cochin sought his protection against the Zamorin of Calicut and the aggressor was driven back from Cochin, whereupon he also entered into a treaty with Travancore. This remarkable career of conquest and annexation was followed by the no less necessary work of consolidation and reform. Resolving to signalise his reign by a great act of State, the Maharaja, on the 17th January 1750, publicly dedicated the whole of his territory to his family Deity at Trivandrum—Sri Padmanabha—undertaking to administer it thereafter as his servant and agent.

Maharaja Rama Varma

Maharaja Rama Varma who succeeded Martanda Varma and ruled from 1758 to 1798 was also a distinguished ruler. He added to the State some more northern principalities, extending Travancore up to its present limits in the north. He constructed the famous northern fortification of the State, known as the Travancore Lines, running from the seacoast near Cranganore to the foot of the Western Ghats, to protect the country against foreign aggression.

In the Second Mysore War the Travancore Army fought side by side with the British soldiers at Calicut, Palghat and other places. Colonel Humberstone, commanding the Company's forces, wrote on that occasion to the Maharaja: "I am well informed how steady and sincere an ally Your Majesty has been to the English Nation. On the 29th December 1789 when Tippu Sultan, the son and successor of Haidar, marched with his army to invade Travancore, on the ostensible reason that he gave protection to refugees from Malabar and Cochin, a few Travancore soldiers administered a formidable blow to him." As Colonel Wilkes, the historian of Mysore, observes: "The fortune of a day which was turned by twenty men cost the Sultan's army upward of two thousand." Tippu himself was lamed for life, and his seals, rings and ornaments appropriated as trophies. Rama Varma came to be known as Dharma Raja for the courageous stand that he took against Tippu and the asylum he gave to those whom the Sultan defeated and persecuted; and his name is remembered with gratitude all over Kerala even today.

From 1810

From the accession of Rani Gauri Lakshmi Bayi in 1810, the State has steadily maintained its onward march in all directions. Maharaja Swati Tirunal (1829—46), eldest son and successor of Rani Lakshmi Bayi was not only a great ruler but also a distinguished poet, composer and patron of arts and letters. Maharaja Ayilyam Tirunal (1860—80) gained for Travancore, in the discussions on India in the British House of Commons, the coveted distinction of "the Model Native State." Maharaja Visakham Tirunal (1880—85) and Maharaja Sri Mulam Tirunal (1885—1924) were also remarkable rulers who conferred many lasting benefits on their subjects. His Highness Sri Chitra Tirunal, Maharaja Sir Bala Rama Varma, a worthy successor of those illustrious rulers, has within the space of fourteen years of rule secured for himself an abiding place in the hearts and affections not only of the people of Travancore but of the whole of India by his epoch-making acts of far-sighted statesmanship.

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