

Raja Kesava Das and His Reforms in Travancore

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Abstract: *Raja Kesava Das was one of the most important Dewan in the history of Travancore. He has assumed the new name Devan Instead of the old designation of Dalwa. During his Dewanship Travancore rose into the prominence. He was able to defend the threat of Mysorean invasion through his diplomatic skills. The Dewanship of Raja Kesava Das is a memorable era in the history of Travancore. On seeing his ability and skills British Governor Lord Wellesley conferred upon him title of 'Raja'. The period of Raja Kesava Das remarked a turning point in the history of Travancore.*

Keywords: Reforms, Travancore, diplomatic

1. Introduction

Raman Kesavan popularly known as Raja Kesava Das was born at Kunnathur a small village in South Travancore.¹ He was the Dewan of Travancore during the reign of Dharma Raja Karthika Thirunal Rama Varma. Even though he had received only minimal formal education he was having good knowledge and abilities in Mathematics. The Maharaja of Travancore was impressed by his skills and appointed him to the Travancore palace. He was further given the charge of supervising the commercial department of the state. Due to his constant engagements with the Dutch and English he understands that the wealth and prosperity of the State depends upon the commerce. So he made his endeavor to commercialize the state. He tremendously tried to improve the material prosperity of the State. For this he opened regular correspondence with the Dutch and English East India Company.² As the Diwan of the Travancore State he received military training. He was deeply attached to De Lannoy. Under him he was giving military Training. He was well trained and was much attached to the Muslim and Pathon Officers in the military service. At that time Travancore was facing Threat from the Tippu Sulthan. Tippu found that if Travancore was taken he could easily strike at Madurai and Tirunaveli, so he marched down to Travancore.³ But Raja Kesava Das with his military task could easily defend the State from the aggression of Tippu.⁴

The achievement of Raja Kesava Das includes the internal reforms of the State. He gave foremost importance to raise the commercial amenities of the State. For this he resolved to open two new ports, One was at Alleppey and other at Vizhinjam. It was due to the effort of Kesava Das, Alleppey which was mere jungle inhabited by monkeys and Jackals was turned to a Port town where merchants from various place were brought and provided with all essential requirements. Alappuzha attained progress and became the financial nerve centre of Travancore during his time. In addition to these a palace for the Maharaja was also constructed for his comfortable stay whenever he visited the

new port towns.⁵ He also opened timber depot in order to make place a centre of commerce. Mathew Tharakan a rich native of Travancore was given contract to collect all the timber of North Travancore State and store in the depot for sale.⁶ Raja Kesava Das also entrusted Vicharippukars in order to collect produce such as honey Cardomam etc.⁷ Raja Kesava Das also made improvement in the ports of Colachel and Puntora. His efforts and improvement increased the income of the state. He also took special interest for the development of agriculture and industries. For the effective agricultural progress irrigation works were properly executed. Fallow lands were brought for cultivation. He also took special interest in providing loans for the needy agriculturalist. Proper survey and land assessment were conducted on regular base. He also gave importance for the fortification. The Diwan also completed the construction of the Gopuram of Sri. Padmanabha Swami Temple.⁸ Travancore was improved and beautified during his period. The modern Chala Bazaar, owns its origin from the vision and ability of Raja Kesava Das.⁹ Due to his farsighted abilities Raja Kesava Das was able to make tremendous changes in the Travancore State. Under his Diwanship communication network were opened in order to facilitate transport facilities for export and import of trade. Roads and Canals were widened. Existing port were improved and new ports were constructed. For the proper administration of the State a collection of rules and laws was framed¹⁰. Officials of the state were strictly supervised by the Diwan. Petitions were settled as early as possible by the State. Whenever a female petitioner comes before the district cutchery her complaint was settled at once without any further delay.¹¹

Raja Kesava Das also made his contributions in Revenue reforms. He issued serious of new coins.¹² A new tax collect

¹ Shungoony Menon P.A., A History of Travancore, Cochin 1983,p.146

² Shungoony Menon P.A., History of Travancore, Cochin, 1983, p. 147.

³ Deepa T, Raja Kesava Das and his Reforms in Travancore 1789 - 1799, Monomanian Sundarnar University July 2013

⁴ Wilson, History of the Madras Army, Travancore 1862, Vol II, p- 212.

⁵ Velu pillai, T.K., The Travancore State Manual Vol. II Trivandrum, 1945,p.44

⁶ Nagam Aiya V., The Travancore State Manual Vol. II, Trivandrum 1906,p.380.

⁷ Shungoony Menon P, History of Travancore, Madras, 1878,p.422.

⁸ Vellupillai T.K. , The Travancore State Manual Vol. II, Trivandrum , 1945,p.44

⁹ Ibrahimkunju A.P. Mysore-Kerala Relations in the Eighteenth century Kerala, Historical society Trivandrum, 1975,p.48

¹⁰ Panamaban S Temples in Kanayakumar district Nagercoil, 1970,p.61

¹¹ Deepu T, Raja Kesava Dasa and his Reforms in Travancore 1789-1799 Monomanian Sundarnar University, July 2013.

¹² Krishna Ayyar K.V., A History of Kerala, Coimbatore 1968,p.17

Nilavari was imposed on all Sirkar pattom lands¹³ Raja Kesava Dasa can be considered as the most important person in the history of Travancore who has to be raised to the position of Dewan, showing a ability in different sphere as varied as infrastructure development trade and commerce, military development etc.

His tenure of Diwanship ended with the demise of Dharma Raja Karthika Thirunal in 1798. Later on he was proclaimed as a traitor and kept under house arrest which helped Jayanthan Sankaran Nambootiri to usurp the part of Dewan later his family assets were confiscated and he was poisoned to death on 21 April 1799. His death put the state into turmoil.

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¹³ Velu Pillai T.K., The Travancore State Manual Vol.II, Trivandrum 1945,p.429