

The Nayakkar Dynasty and Its Influence on The Kandyan Kingdom in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The Nayakkar dynasty of South India played a pivotal role in shaping the political and cultural landscape of Sri Lanka during the Kandyan Kingdom period. This research examines the historical interactions between South India and Sri Lanka by focusing on the Nayakkar dynasty's influence on the Kandyan monarchy. The study utilizes historical sources such as the *Mahavamsa*, *Rajavaliya*, and *Pujaavaliya* to analyze the integration of Nayakkar rulers into the Sri Lankan royal lineage and their impact on governance, culture, and political affairs. The findings reveal that Nayakkar rulers introduced new administrative frameworks, facilitated religious and cultural exchange, and maintained strategic military alliances. Additionally, the architectural and artistic influences of the Nayakkar dynasty enriched Sri Lanka's cultural heritage. Furthermore, the economic policies of the Nayakkars, their influence on trade, and the integration of South Indian administrative practices are examined in detail. The study concludes that the Nayakkar legacy remains a crucial component of Sri Lanka's historical narrative, signifying deep-rooted connections between the island and South India.

Keywords

Cultural Exchange, Economic Policies, Kandyan Kingdom, Nayakkar Dynasty, South Indian Influence, Sri Lanka

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Introduction

The Nayakkar dynasty, originating from South India, significantly shaped the political, cultural, and religious landscape of Sri Lanka, particularly during the Kandyan Kingdom era. The 16th and 17th centuries marked an intensified phase of interaction between South Indian kingdoms and Sri Lanka, largely driven by diplomatic marriages, military alliances, and economic exchanges. These interactions not only altered the political dynamics of Sri Lanka but also had a lasting impact on its cultural identity. In the Kandyan Kingdom, the influence of the Nayakkars were most notable from the reign of King Senarat, with the dynasty's presence further strengthened through royal marriages. This period witnessed a blending of South Indian administrative practices with local traditions, creating a unique governance framework. Moreover, the Nayakkar rulers, while embracing Buddhism, also promoted Hindu customs, leading to the establishment of Hindu temples and the integration of South Indian religious practices into the Kandyan culture.

This study explores the multifaceted influence of the Nayakkar dynasty, examining their contributions to governance, religious practices, military strategies, economic policies, and the arts. By examining primary sources such as the *Mahavamsa*, *Rajavaliya*, and *Pujaavaliya*, the research highlights how the Nayakkars' rule not only reshaped the political structure but also played a crucial role in fostering cultural and religious exchange between Sri Lanka and South India. The impact of the Nayakkar dynasty on Sri Lanka's heritage continues to be a significant area of scholarly interest, offering insight into the historical connections between the island and the South Indian subcontinent.

Nayakkar's Presence in Sri Lanka

The Nayakkar dynasty, which played a significant role in the Kandyan Kingdom, emerged from a broader historical context shaped by several South Indian dynasties. These included the Chola, Chera, Kerala, and Pandya dynasties, each of which contributed to the sociopolitical and cultural developments that influenced the Nayakkar rule in Sri Lanka. Understanding these dynasties provide insight into the Nayakkars' governance, trade policies, and cultural impact on the Kandyan Kingdom.

The Chola Influence

The Chola dynasty, one of the most powerful dynasties in South Indian history, had a longstanding connection with Sri Lanka, dating back to its invasions and rule over the island.

Shastri (1947) says that the Vijayanagara period is considered the golden age of Telugu literature. This research highlights that the Kandyan period in Sri Lanka coincides with the Vijayanagara period. During the Chola rule in Tanjore, Telugu kings and Telugu Carnatic musicians began to develop Carnatic music. Although the Chola dynasty is no longer known by that name, it is clear that the area where the majority of Telugus now live was once the Cholas' home. The Andhra region, close to the northern Indian border, was considered the Cholas' home at that time, and the Cholas' mother tongue was Telugu. South India was ruled by the Telugu kings at that time. Tanjore, now part of the state of Tamil Nadu, was the capital of the Cholas during the Tanjore dynasty.

Present-day Tanjore also has a large Telugu population. Among the South Indian states, there are two states where Telugu speakers live today. These are Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. However, there is also a Telugu majority in the present-day state of Tamil Nadu. Most of the Telugu kings and musicians who played a significant role in the development of Carnatic music were Cholas. The Cholas had contact with Sri Lanka since the Vijayanagara period. That era was a flourishing era for Telugu and Sinhala literature.

The Chera Connection

The Chera dynasty, which predominantly occupied the present-day state of Karnataka, maintained strong ties with Sri Lanka through trade and cultural exchanges. This dynasty's historical contributions to the development of Carnatic music and temple architecture were evident in the Nayakkars' patronage of religious and artistic traditions in Sri Lanka. The continued relationship between Sri Lanka and the Kannada-speaking communities of South India facilitated the integration of South Indian art forms into the Kandyan royal court (Shastri, 1962).

The Chera dynasty can be considered as another dynasty that lived close to North India. The native language of the Chera dynasty, who ruled the region that includes parts of present-day Kerala and Tamil Nadu, was Tamil. Neelakantha Shastri has stated that only the Chera dynasty can show an unbroken lineage (Shastri, 1962: 119). There were also close relations between the Chera dynasty and Sri Lankans, and Purandaradas Swami, who is considered the father of Carnatic Music, lived in Karnataka. His mother tongue is Kannada. Close relations with the people of Karnataka, who speak Kannada, continue to exist today. Pooja Umashankar, a popular film actress in Sri Lanka today, is a woman from the southern Indian state of Karnataka and her mother tongue is Kannada. Although her father was a Kannada national from Karnataka

and her mother tongue is Kannada, her mother is a Sinhalese woman. It should be noted that the mother tongue of the ancient Chera dynasty and the people of present-day Karnataka state is Kannada.

The Kerala (Malayalam) Influence

The Kerala dynasty, often associated with the Malayalam-speaking communities of South India, contributed significantly to Sri Lanka's cultural landscape during the Nayakkar rule. The Vijayanagara Empire, which integrated various South Indian traditions, influenced the Nayakkar governance style, particularly in terms of religious tolerance and economic administration. The Nayakkar kings, who sought to balance Buddhist and Hindu traditions, reflected the religious harmony that was characteristic of the Kerala dynasty's rule in South India (Gunawardana, 1990).

According to tradition, South India was divided into three kingdoms, namely Chola, Chera and Pandya, and these three kingdoms are mentioned by Ashoka as the places where he achieved Dharmavijaya outside his empire (Basham, 1962: 79). Therefore, it is extremely difficult to provide information about the Kerala dynasty. However, Sannasgala (1994:276) states that the empire formed by the merger of the South Indian kingdoms of Chola, Pandya, Kerala and Karnataka was called Vijayanagar. According to Sannasgala (1994), the Kerala dynasty is clearly visible. Similarly, the dynasty that Sannasgala called the Karnataka dynasty must have been the Chera dynasty. According to the geographical map of South India, it is believed that the ancient Kerala dynasty lived in a region below the state of Karnataka where the Chera dynasty lived and to the west of the state of Tamil Nadu. Survey reports indicate that present-day Kerala is the most literate state in South India. However, many Carnatic musicians, such as Chembai Vaidyanath Bhagavatar, who made a valuable contribution to Carnatic music, and his student Yesudas, belong to the present-day state of Kerala.

The Pandya Legacy

The Pandya dynasty, primarily centered in Tamil Nadu, had historical interactions with Sri Lanka that spanned centuries. The Pandyas maintained diplomatic ties and trade relations with Sri Lanka, and their influence persisted through the Nayakkars' presence in the Kandyan Kingdom. The Nayakkar rulers, many of whom hailed from Madurai, incorporated elements of Tamil governance, temple architecture, and religious practices into Sri Lankan society. The

establishment of Hindu temples and the encouragement of Tamil cultural elements in the Kandyan court were direct outcomes of this legacy (Paranavitana, 1961).

The relationship between the Pandyas and Sri Lankans dates back to ancient times. The native language of the Pandyas was Tamil, which belonged to the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. After British rule, the city of Chennai developed around its port and airport. Many festivals and concerts are held in the capital city of Chennai for the development of Carnatic music. Several institutions can be seen supporting them. The Pallavas and the Pandyas, who ruled Kanchipuram and Maduram located in the far southern tip of the Indian peninsula, maintained constant contact with Sri Lanka (History of Sri Lanka, 1964: 263). Therefore, it can be said that the Pandyas ruled from Maduram. At that time, Maduram or present-day Madurai belonged to the state of Tamil Nadu. The mother tongue of most of the people living in the state of Tamil Nadu is Tamil.

Marriage Alliances and Political Influence of the Nayakkar Dynasty

Historically, Sinhalese monarchs formed alliances with South Indian royal families through strategic marriages. This practice intensified during the reign of King Senarat. His son, King Rajasinghe II (1635–1687), further solidified the Nayakkar's presence in Sri Lanka by marrying a princess from Madurai. This marital alliance led to a deeper integration of the Nayakkar lineage into the Kandyan royal family, eventually culminating in the ascendancy of Nayakkar rulers to the Kandyan throne (Senewiratne, 1989). The political significance of these alliances cannot be overstated, as they paved the way for the Nayakkars' influence on the governance and administrative systems of the kingdom.

Most historians agree that there were political relations between the South Indian kingdoms that existed alongside the Sri Lankan Kandyan Kingdom in Sri Lanka. South India was divided into three kingdoms, the Cholas, Cheras, and Pandyas (Basham, 1962: 79). Cholas, Cheras, and Pandyas are the names given by the ancients to the present-day Telugus, Malayalis and Tamils, and it is clear that there were power struggles between them from ancient times. When the South Indian invaders came to Sri Lanka, the ancient kings used the same South Indian forces that opposed the invaders to defeat them. When the Cholas invaded, Sri Lankans sought help from the Pandyas, and when the Pandyas invaded, they sought help from the Cholas.

The Nayakkar reign of the South Indian Thanjavur kingdom is dated 1535-1673 AD. Similarly, Wimaladharmasuriya I, who ruled the kingdom of Kandy in Sri Lanka (1592-1604, Senarath

(1604-1635) and Rajasinghe II (1635-1687) are also mentioned in ancient texts such as Rajavaliya (page 120) and Sinhala Samaja Sanvidhanayaa (page 281). All three of them were Sinhalese kings. Accordingly, it is clear that three Sinhala kings ruled Sri Lanka during the Kandyan period, concurrent with the Nayakkars' rule of Tanjore in South India.

There were nine kings in the Kandyan kingdom of Sri Lanka. From the reign of King Viladharماسuriya I (1592-1604) to the reign of King Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe (1798-1815), there were five Sinhalese kings and four South Indian Nayakkar kings who ruled the Kingdom of Kandy. These were the five Sinhalese kings Wimaladharماسuriya I, Senarath, Rajasinghe II, Wimaladharماسuriya II, and Narendrasinghe. The four Nayakkara kings were Vijaya Rajasinghe, Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe, Rajadhi Rajasinghe, and Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe. The reigns of the five Sinhalese kings who ruled the Kingdom of Kandy and the four South Indian Nayakkara kings are as follows:

Table 1

Sinhala Kings and Nayakkar Kings of the Kandyan Period

Sinhala Kings and South Indian Nayakkar Kings who ruled the Kingdom of Kandy	Period of reign	
Wimaladharماسuriya I Senarath Rajasinghe II Wimaladharماسuriya II Narendrasinghe	AD 1592-1604 AD 1604-1635 AD 1635-1687 AD 1687-1707 AD 1707-1739	Sinhala Kings
Vijaya Rajasinghe Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe Rajadhi Rajasinghe Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe	AD 1739-1747 AD 1747-1781 A.D. 1781-1798 A.D. 1798-1815	Nayakkara Kings

The following are the beginning and ending years of several South Indian provincial kingdoms that are believed to have existed concurrently with the Kingdom of Kandy in Sri Lanka.

1. Kingdom of Mysore 1399-1947 (AD)
2. Kingdom of Madurai 1559-1736 (AD)
3. Kingdom of Thanjavur 1572-1918 (AD)
4. Kingdom of Travancore 1729-1947 (AD)

Accordingly, a comparative study was conducted on the cultural relations between the Kingdom of Kandy in Sri Lanka and the Nayakkar Dynasty. It was also revealed that there were different opinions and views about this relationship. In the 13th century AD, a Muslim sultanate was established in Madurai in South India, but in 1336 AD, an independent Hindu state was established in Vijayanagara (Basham, 1962: 98). However, the greatness of the Vijayanagara Empire came to an end in 1565 AD (Basham, 1962: 99).

Nayakkar Monarchs and Governance

King Narendrasinha (1707–1739) strengthened the Nayakkar dynasty's position in Sri Lanka by marrying another Nayakkar princess, further embedding the dynasty into the Kandyan royal lineage. The governance structure during this period was significantly influenced by South Indian feudal traditions. The introduction of South Indian administrative practices led to notable reforms in the Kandyan Kingdom, reshaping the island's political framework (Gunawardana, 1990). The integration of South Indian governance models brought changes to taxation systems, land management, and military organization.

South India itself was ruled by the kings of the Telugu people during the 17th and 18th centuries. Now, they are the majority in present-day South India. Similarly, Sri Lanka was ruled by the kings of the Sinhalese people, who are the majority in Sri Lanka, in the 17th and 18th centuries. Thus, during the Kandyan period, Sinhalese kings ruled in Sri Lanka, whereas the Telugu kings ruled in South India. However, it is believed that during the late Kandyan period, the Sri Lankan kingdom was ruled by the Nayakkara kings of South India, and thus, cultural relations existed between South India and Sri Lanka under the patronage of the state.

Economic Policies and Trade Influence

The Nayakkar rulers implemented several economic policies that significantly strengthened trade relations between Sri Lanka and South India. They facilitated the development of regional markets, encouraged agricultural expansion, and promoted maritime trade (Paranavitana, 1961). Additionally, the introduction of South Indian financial management systems played a key role in improving tax collection, enhancing state revenues, and ensuring economic stability within the Kandyan Kingdom (Gunawardana, 1990). The expansion of trade networks helped the Kandyan Kingdom sustain itself economically, particularly in the face of growing European colonial threats.

Comparative Influence with Other South Indian Dynasties

Unlike the earlier influences of the Chola, Pandya, and Chera dynasties often marked by invasions and direct rule, the Nayakkars integrated into Sri Lankan society through diplomacy and intermarriage. This unique approach enabled them to maintain legitimacy and cultural influence without resorting to aggressive conquest. While the Chola dynasty's dominance (10th–12th centuries) emphasized temple construction and economic control, the Nayakkar rulers prioritized religious revival and administrative restructuring, shaping the long-term socio-political landscape of the Kandyan Kingdom (Ragupathy, 1987).

Case Studies of Prominent Nayakkar Monarchs

Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe (1747–1782)

Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe is renowned for his religious contributions, particularly the restoration of Buddhism. By inviting monks from Siam and commissioning Buddhist scriptures, he strengthened monastic traditions and temple constructions (Malalgoda, 1976). His diplomatic efforts also ensured relative stability within the kingdom.

Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe (1798–1815)

Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe's reign marked the end of the Kandyan monarchy. His ambitious infrastructure projects, such as Kandy Lake and the Audience Hall, demonstrated a commitment to urban development. However, his resistance against British colonial forces led to his eventual capture and exile, ending indigenous rule in Sri Lanka (Pieris, 1999).

Impact of the Nayakkars on the Kandyan Kingdom

Political and Administrative Changes

The Nayakkar rulers introduced governance structures in Sri Lanka that mirrored South Indian feudal systems, leading to significant administrative reforms. Their methods of taxation and land distribution, which were influenced by South Indian practices, brought greater efficiency to the Kandyan administration (Gunawardana, 1990). These changes not only streamlined governance but also facilitated the integration of South Indian bureaucratic structures into Sri Lankan political systems, contributing to the stability and efficiency of the kingdom's administration.

Specific changes included alterations in taxation policies, where the Nayakkars implemented revenue collection methods similar to the Vijayanagara System, ensuring a more structured tax system. They also reorganized land ownership, introducing a more centralized distribution method that reduced the power of local Kandyan chieftains. Militarily, the Nayakkars reinforced the Kandyan army by incorporating South Indian cavalry tactics and fortification techniques, which strengthened the kingdom's resistance against European colonial powers (Gunawardana, 1990).

The Nayakkar rulers introduced several administrative changes in the Kandyan Kingdom, adapting South Indian governance models while preserving indigenous structures. Notably, they reinforced a centralized form of governance, strengthened diplomatic ties with European powers, and restructured military strategies. For example, King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe (1747–1782) implemented tax reforms that aligned with agrarian productivity, ensuring a more sustainable economic system (Obeyesekere, 1984). Furthermore, Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe (1798–1815), the last Nayakkar ruler, promoted infrastructure development, such as the construction of the Kandy Lake, which remains an iconic landmark today (Pieris, 1999).

Religious and Cultural Exchange

While the Nayakkar rulers embraced Buddhism, they also promoted Hindu traditions, leading to the establishment of Hindu temples and the integration of South Indian customs into the Kandyan court culture. The Nayakkar kings supported Buddhist monasteries, balancing their dual religious affiliations to maintain social harmony (Paranavitana, 1961). This cultural exchange allowed for the coexistence of Hindu and Buddhist practices, enriching the spiritual and cultural life of the Kandyan Kingdom.

Also, in this research, it was possible to confirm that there were strong connections between the Sinhalese culture of Sri Lanka and the Telugu culture of South India during the Kandyan Period. Although the Nayakkar kings of South India embraced Buddhism while ruling Sri Lanka, it is believed that the Nayakkars, who were Hindus by birth, either personally or through their efforts to preserve their religious and cultural elements, promoted the Carnatic Music Tradition in the country. It is known that the Cholas or Telugus ruled South India during the Kandyan period and that South Indian classical music was developed under the leadership of Telugu musicians. This research also confirmed that the tradition emerged and developed.

The Nayakkar dynasty profoundly influenced Sri Lanka's cultural and religious landscape. The promotion of Hindu customs within the predominantly Buddhist society led to a syncretic tradition that persists in Sri Lanka today. The rulers played a pivotal role in reviving Theravāda Buddhism by inviting Buddhist monks from Siam (Thailand) to re-establish higher ordination (Upasampadā), thus ensuring the continuity of Buddhist monastic practices in Sri Lanka (Malalgoda, 1976). Additionally, South Indian architectural styles can be observed in temples such as the Vishnu Devalaya in Kandy, reflecting Nayakkars' artistic contributions (Gunawardana, 1990).

Economic and Trade Influence

The Nayakkar rulers played a crucial role in expanding Sri Lanka's economic ties with South India. They facilitated the trade of goods such as spices, textiles, and gems, which helped the Kandyan Kingdom sustain its economy amidst European colonial pressures (Senewiratne, 1989). Additionally, the integration of South Indian trade networks enhanced the economic stability of the region, enabling the kingdom to thrive despite external threats. Their policies in trade and commerce laid the foundation for long-lasting economic connections between Sri Lanka and South India.

Artistic and Architectural Contributions

Dravidian architectural styles significantly influenced the design of temples and royal buildings during the Nayakkar era, thereby enriching Sri Lanka's artistic heritage (Paranavitana, 1961). The use of intricate carvings, temple towers, and South Indian artistic motifs became prominent in Kandyan-era structures, marking a significant shift in architectural design. These stylistic elements introduced by the Nayakkar rulers left a lasting legacy on the visual culture of the region.

Military Alliances

The Kandyan Kingdom maintained military cooperation with South Indian powers, particularly in the face of European colonial threats, consequently strengthening its defense strategies (Gunawardana, 1990). The Nayakkars brought advanced warfare techniques from South India, including improved fortifications and battle tactics that were crucial in defending the kingdom against foreign incursions. Their military expertise played a pivotal role in the resistance against European colonization, contributing to the stability and autonomy of the Kandyan Kingdom during this period. Militarily, the Nayakkars reinforced the Kandyan army by

incorporating South Indian cavalry tactics and fortification techniques, which strengthened the kingdom's resistance against European colonial powers (Gunawardana, 1990).

Conclusion

The Nayakkar dynasty played a transformative role in the Kandyan Kingdom's history. Their marital ties with the Sinhalese monarchy facilitated their rise to power, leaving a lasting impact on governance, economy, culture, and architecture. The Nayakkars not only introduced new administrative frameworks but also strengthened Sri Lanka's economic stability through trade and fiscal policies. Their military strategies helped the Kandyan Kingdom resist colonial incursions. The legacy of the Nayakkar rulers continues to be a subject of scholarly interest, emphasizing the enduring historical connections between Sri Lanka and South India.

The Nayakkar dynasty's influence on Sri Lanka extended beyond their political rule, leaving a lasting impact on governance, religion, and culture. Their legacy is evident in the architectural landmarks, religious practices, and administrative structures that persist to this day. Despite their South Indian origins, the Nayakkar rulers adapted to and enriched Sri Lankan traditions, making them a crucial part of the island's historical narrative. Future scholarly research can explore their contributions through a comparative analysis of South Indian influences on Sri Lankan heritage.

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