



Research Article

## The Rebel Deeran Chiinnamalai's Armed Resistance Against the British Supramacy in Kongunadu

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**Abstract.** The history of the Indian freedom struggle extends beyond the major political movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Before organized nationalism emerged, several regional leaders resisted the expansion of the British East India Company. Among them, Dheeran Chinnamalai played a significant role in the early resistance to British rule in Kongu Nadu and South India. Born as Theerthagiri in 1756, he opposed colonial taxation and political control and later led an armed struggle. His association with Tipu Sultan, military experience, mobilization of Kongu forces, and establishment of Odanilai strengthened his resistance. This study examines the political conditions of Kongu Nadu,

Chinnamalai's connection with Mysore, military campaigns, guerrilla warfare, defence of Odanilai, and his capture and execution in 1805. It also places his activities within the broader context of the Palayakkarar and South Indian rebellions. The study argues that his resistance reflected the defence of regional autonomy and opposition to colonial expansion. His career demonstrates the presence of organized regional resistance in South India well before the rise of nationalist politics. His legacy remains significant in the history of Kongu Nadu and early Indian resistance to colonial rule.

**Keywords:** Dheeran Chinnamalai, Kongu Nadu, East India Company, Palayakkarar, Tipu Sultan, Mysore, British Colonialism, Armed Resistance, Odanilai, South Indian Rebellion

## INTRODUCTION

India's struggle against **British colonial rule** developed through different forms of resistance across regions. In South India, particularly Tamil Nadu, the **Palayakkarar rebellions** represented an important phase of early resistance against the **East India Company**. Within this context, **Kongu Nadu** became strategically important. British expansion brought changes in **taxation, administration, military organization and political authority**, creating tensions with local chieftains and traditional elites. **Dheeran Chinnamalai**, born as **Theerthagiri** in **1756**, emerged from this political environment. Belonging to the **Palayakottai Manradiar family**, he was trained in **silambam, archery, horse riding and warfare**. His knowledge of the local terrain and military skills helped him develop regional influence. His early resistance was associated with opposition to **Mysore revenue authority**. Traditional accounts describe him as challenging tax collection and redistributing revenue among the people. This memory reflects his image as a protector of **local interests and political autonomy**. Chinnamalai later joined **Tipu Sultan's resistance against the British**, organizing a trained **Kongu military force**. After Tipu Sultan's death in **1799**, he returned to Kongu Nadu and continued his struggle against the **East India Company** from **Odanilai**. Thus, Chinnamalai's resistance may be understood through **three major phases: local leadership in Kongu Nadu, participation in the Mysore-British conflict, and independent armed resistance against British rule after 1799**. His career therefore represents an important chapter in the history of **early anti-colonial resistance in Tamil Nadu**.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- **To examine the early life and political background of Dheeran Chinnamalai.**
- **To analyse the political and economic conditions of Kongu Nadu during the period of Mysore and British expansion.**
- **To examine Dheeran Chinnamalai's relationship with Tipu Sultan and the Mysore state.**
- **To analyse his role in the early armed resistance against the British East India Company.**

## METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

The study adopts a **historical, descriptive and analytical methodology** based on **primary and secondary sources**, including government records, archival documents, books, journals and local traditions. A **source-critical and chronological approach** is used to examine Dheeran Chinnamalai's resistance and its **historical significance in Kongu Nadu**.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature on **Dheeran Chinnamalai** includes local histories, biographical works and broader studies of South Indian resistance. **S. Rasu's work** is important for understanding Chinnamalai's life, military activities and resistance to British rule. **K. Rajayyan's study of the South Indian Rebellion** provides a wider political context for the resistance of 1800–1801. Works by **Bipan Chandra** and **Ishita Banerjee-Dube** further explain the expansion of British rule in India. Tamil Nadu history textbooks also recognize Chinnamalai as a **Kongu Palayakkarar who resisted the East India Company**. Overall, existing literature highlights his **heroism, military resistance and role in the early struggle against British rule**, while the present study critically brings together regional and broader historical perspectives.

## Historical Background of Kongu Nadu

Kongu Nadu occupied a **strategically important position in western Tamil Nadu**, connecting the interior Tamil regions with Mysore and the western coast. This geographical position gave the region considerable **political, economic, and military significance**. During the eighteenth century, substantial parts of Kongu Nadu came under Mysore influence. Following the Anglo-Mysore Wars, the region was brought under the control of the **East India Company**. The political transition from Nayak and Mysore authority to British rule resulted in significant administrative changes, particularly in the system of **revenue collection**. Revenue was not merely an economic obligation but also an important instrument of political authority. For local communities and chieftains, the imposition of external taxation represented a challenge to their traditional rights and political autonomy. It was within this changing political and administrative context that **Dheeran Chinnamalai emerged as a prominent opponent of external authority**. His resistance to Mysore and subsequently to British power reflected the wider tensions between local political interests and expanding colonial control in Kongu Nadu. Thus, his activities should be understood not as an isolated episode of defiance but as part of the **broader history of early resistance to British expansion in South India**.

## Early Life and Political Formation of Dheeran Chinnamalai

Dheeran Chinnamalai, born as **Theerthagiri in 1756**, belonged to the influential **Palayakottai Manradiar family**, which exercised considerable influence over land and local society. His father, Rathnaswamy, and mother, Periyatha, played an important role in his early social environment. Growing up within a society where local chieftains were responsible for territorial protection, dispute settlement, and the

maintenance of armed retainers, Chinnamalai was exposed to the traditions of leadership and martial culture from an early age. He received training in **silambam, swordsmanship, archery, wrestling, and other martial arts**, which strengthened his physical and military abilities. This training later became an important foundation for his armed resistance against expanding British authority.

Chinnamalai's early development was not limited to martial training. His involvement in local affairs and disputes helped him establish **social networks and political influence** among the people of Kongu Nadu. His residence at Kangeyam reportedly served as a centre for supporters and individuals associated with regional activities, facilitating the mobilization of **men, resources, and local intelligence**. His knowledge of the local terrain and military organization further strengthened his capacity for resistance. Thus, his transformation from a regional chieftain into a prominent military leader was shaped by the combined influence of **family background, martial training, social networks, local leadership, and emerging political consciousness**.

### From Theerthagiri to Dheeran Chinnamalai

One of the most prominent traditions concerning Chinnamalai's early career relates to the collection of taxes by Mysore officials. According to the account preserved in the research material, tax revenue collected from Kongu was being transported through the region towards Mysore. Theerthagiri intercepted the collection and redistributed it among the local people. He reportedly instructed the tax officials to inform their superior that a "small hill" between Chennimalai and Sivanmalai had taken the money. This episode is traditionally associated with the emergence of the name **Chinnamalai**. The historical significance of this episode lies not only in the story itself but also in the political symbolism attached to it. The tradition portrays Chinnamalai as a leader who challenged the authority of an external power and asserted a moral right to protect local resources. The subsequent confrontation with Mysore forces further strengthened his military reputation. The research material states that Mysore forces were sent against him and that the confrontation took place near the Noyyal River, where Chinnamalai's forces emerged victorious. This encounter is significant because it provided Chinnamalai with **practical battlefield experience** and demonstrated that local forces could effectively challenge a larger state military establishment.

### The Relationship Between Dheeran Chinnamalai and Tipu Sultan

The relationship between Dheeran Chinnamalai and Tipu Sultan forms one of the most significant aspects of Chinnamalai's political and military career. Following **Hyder Ali's death in 1782**, Tipu Sultan continued Mysore's confrontation with the **British East India Company**. Chinnamalai's opposition to British expansion increasingly coincided with Tipu Sultan's strategic objectives. According to the **supplied research material**, Chinnamalai mobilized approximately **one thousand young men** and joined the **Mysore forces**. These Kongu soldiers received military training, including instruction from **French military personnel** who supported Tipu

Sultan. This experience provided Chinnamalai and his followers with valuable knowledge of **organized warfare, military discipline, and battlefield tactics**.

The association with Mysore significantly expanded Chinnamalai's **military experience and political outlook**. He became connected with the wider **Mysore-British conflict**, extending his activities beyond the local political sphere. The research material associates his forces with important engagements such as **Siddheswaram, Malavalli, and Srirangapatnam**. However, the precise nature of his personal participation in each engagement requires **careful verification through primary and contemporary sources**. University materials also refer to his training under **French military instructors and Tipu Sultan**, after which he organized armed resistance in **Kongu Nadu**. The association with Tipu Sultan therefore marked a **significant turning point** in Chinnamalai's career. It strengthened his military capabilities and contributed to his development from a **regional chieftain into an experienced commander**. His later activities demonstrate the importance of this experience in shaping his role in the broader **resistance to British expansion**.

### **After Tipu Sultan: A New Phase of Resistance**

The death of Tipu Sultan in 1799 transformed the political situation in South India. The British victory removed one of the most powerful regional centres of resistance to the expansion of Company rule. For Chinnamalai, the defeat of Mysore did not mean surrender. Instead, it encouraged him to reorganize his forces in Kongu Nadu. According to the research material, after Tipu's death, he returned to Kongu and established his base at **Odanilai**, where he organized soldiers, trained young men, and prepared weapons. The importance of Odanilai was both military and symbolic. It provided a strategic base from which Chinnamalai could monitor British movements and coordinate resistance. The surrounding terrain facilitated mobility and concealment, while local support provided food, intelligence, and manpower. His resistance also involved attempts to establish alliances with other anti-British forces. The research material identifies figures such as **Gopal Nayak, Appachi Gounder, and other regional commanders** as being associated with his wider network. Thus, after 1799, Chinnamalai's movement became increasingly independent of Mysore. It represented a **regional Kongu resistance to the consolidation of Company rule**.

### **Organization of Kongu Resistance**

A major strength of Chinnamalai's movement was his ability to mobilize local manpower. His forces did not constitute merely a conventional standing army; rather, they were closely connected with village communities, local chiefs, martial groups, and regional networks. The supplied material emphasizes the participation of people from different communities in his coalition, including Gounders, Thevars, Vanniyars, Vettuvans, Nayakkars, Nadars, Muslims, and marginalized communities. This aspect deserves particular attention because it indicates that **regional resistance could transcend narrow social boundaries when confronted with an external political threat**. Chinnamalai also placed considerable emphasis on military training. The material states that he organized youth forces and established facilities

for the manufacture of weapons. Such measures indicate an attempt to develop a sustainable military infrastructure rather than relying entirely on traditional weapons and temporary levies. His military organization can therefore be understood through four major elements: **manpower mobilization, military training, local intelligence, and control of strategic terrain.**

### **The Coimbatore Campaign of 1800**

The attempted attack on Coimbatore in 1800 represented an important stage in Chinnamalai's resistance. The objective was to challenge British military power at one of the major strategic centres of Kongu Nadu. The research material associates the campaign with a wider alliance involving regional leaders and former Mysore military personnel. University-level sources similarly record that Chinnamalai sought assistance from the Maruthu brothers and other regional allies in an attempt to attack the Company's position at Coimbatore. The campaign did not achieve its intended objective. Its failure illustrates one of the major limitations faced by the anti-British forces: coordination among geographically separated military groups was difficult. In contrast, the Company possessed a centralized military command structure, superior logistical resources, and the ability to move reinforcements across different territories. Chinnamalai therefore increasingly relied on mobility and irregular warfare rather than attempting to defeat the British through conventional pitched battles.

### **Guerrilla Warfare and Military Strategies**

The most distinctive feature of Chinnamalai's later resistance was his use of **mobility, surprise, and knowledge of the local terrain.** Government educational materials describe his use of guerrilla tactics and his ability to evade British attempts to capture him. His strategy was particularly effective in the geographical environment of Kongu Nadu. Hills, forests, river systems, and village networks provided opportunities for concealment and rapid movement. The British possessed greater numbers and superior artillery, but these advantages were less decisive when their forces had to operate in unfamiliar terrain. Chinnamalai could attack at selected points, withdraw quickly, and reappear elsewhere. The research material records that British forces repeatedly found it difficult to capture him because of his ability to maintain a **small and mobile military force.** This strategy demonstrates an important principle of early anti-colonial warfare: **a smaller regional force could challenge a larger imperial army by refusing to fight according to the enemy's preferred military conditions.**

### **The Kaveri-Bhavani Resistance**

The resistance associated with the Kaveri-Bhavani region occupies an important place in the historical memory of Dheeran Chinnamalai. The supplied material describes a confrontation in 1801 in which his forces resisted British troops near the river system. The river environment had considerable strategic significance. Rivers could serve as natural barriers as well as defensive positions. Local knowledge of crossing points, surrounding villages, and routes could provide indigenous forces

with advantages that were less accessible to outside troops. The reported success of Chinnamalai's forces illustrates the effectiveness of local resistance when combined with knowledge of the terrain, mobility, and surprise. Such tactical successes could strengthen the morale of the resistance movement and reinforce Chinnamalai's reputation among the people of Kongu Nadu.

### **Odanilai as the Centre of Resistance**

Odanilai became the symbolic and strategic centre of Dheeran Chinnamalai's anti-British movement. After returning from the Mysore conflict, he established a base there and prepared for continued resistance. The fortification of Odanilai represented more than a military preparation; it also symbolized an assertion of local authority at a time when the East India Company was expanding its political and military influence over the region. The British recognized the strategic importance of Odanilai. The research material describes a major British expedition under General Harris, involving substantial manpower and artillery, with the objective of destroying Chinnamalai's stronghold. However, Chinnamalai's forces evacuated the fort before the British assault, after which the British demolished it. The episode illustrates an important aspect of Chinnamalai's military strategy: preserving his fighting force could, under certain circumstances, be more important than defending a fixed fortification. This approach enabled him to maintain the continuity of resistance despite the destruction of his principal stronghold.

### **British Counter-Strategies**

The British gradually adapted their strategy to counter Chinnamalai's resistance. Military force alone had not succeeded in capturing him immediately. Consequently, the East India Company increasingly relied on intelligence gathering, surveillance, local informants, and efforts to disrupt his support networks. The destruction of Odanilai was one component of this broader strategy. Another was the attempt to trace Chinnamalai's movements and identify his sources of support and information. According to the research material, Velappan, who remained connected with Chinnamalai while operating under British authority, provided information that assisted the resistance. Local accounts further associate the later betrayal by the cook Nallappan with the circumstances leading to Chinnamalai's capture. Since these details are preserved partly through local historical traditions, they should be understood within the context of the oral and regional memory surrounding Chinnamalai. From a broader historical perspective, the episode illustrates how colonial authorities could combine military operations with intelligence gathering, political pressure, surveillance, and the exploitation of internal divisions. The eventual capture of Chinnamalai therefore reflected not simply the use of superior military force but also the British ability to weaken the networks that sustained his resistance.

### **Life in Hiding**

After the destruction of Odanilai, Chinnamalai and his brothers reportedly moved into the forested areas around Karumalai near Palani. This phase

demonstrates the transformation of the movement from territorial resistance into a mobile underground struggle. The brothers depended upon trusted supporters for food, shelter, and intelligence. They also avoided predictable movement patterns because British forces were actively searching for them. Chinnamalai's ability to remain in hiding for an extended period indicates the existence of local networks of support. It also demonstrates why the British eventually concentrated on obtaining intelligence rather than relying solely on large military expeditions.

### Capture, Trial and Martyrdom

The final stage of Chinnamalai's life was shaped by betrayal and capture. According to the supplied account, the British obtained information concerning the brothers' routine through their cook, Nallappan. British troops then surrounded the location where Chinnamalai and his brothers were staying. They were taken to **Sankagiri Fort**, where a tribunal was constituted. The research material states that Chinnamalai was asked to recognize British sovereignty and pay taxes. He refused to accept the Company's authority and was subsequently sentenced to death. The date of his execution is subject to some variation in the available accounts. The supplied material records **31 July 1805**, while another account gives **2 August 1805** and explicitly acknowledges the discrepancy. For a scholarly article, this discrepancy should be acknowledged rather than presenting one date as unquestionable. The significance of his final refusal is considerable. The issue was not merely personal survival. The demand that he accept British sovereignty and taxation represented the very political authority that he had resisted. His execution therefore became the culmination of a political struggle between **Company sovereignty and regional autonomy**.

### Historical Significance of Dheeran Chinnamalai's Resistance

Dheeran Chinnamalai's historical significance can be assessed at several levels. First, he represents **an early form of armed resistance to British colonial expansion in South India**. His major activities occurred decades before the emergence of mass nationalist politics. Second, his resistance illustrates the importance of **regional political autonomy**. He opposed the transfer of authority from established local structures to an external colonial administration. Third, his career demonstrates the significance of **military networks**. His association with Mysore, Tipu Sultan, and French military training expanded his strategic capabilities. Fourth, his resistance demonstrates the importance of **local knowledge and guerrilla tactics**. The British could deploy larger forces, but Chinnamalai repeatedly exploited mobility and knowledge of the terrain. Finally, his history illustrates the importance of **regional memory in reconstructing the history of Indian nationalism**. The Indian freedom struggle did not emerge suddenly in the twentieth century. Instead, it developed through a long succession of local and regional struggles.

## Dheeran Chinnamalai and Regional Nationalism

It is important, however, to use the concept of “nationalism” carefully when discussing the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The political consciousness of Chinnamalai's period cannot simply be equated with the fully developed Indian nationalism of the twentieth century. His resistance was primarily rooted in **regional autonomy, the defence of local society, and opposition to external political domination**. Nevertheless, these regional struggles contributed historically to the development of an anti-colonial consciousness. The research material concludes that Chinnamalai's resistance **sowed the seeds of a later freedom consciousness in Kongu Nadu**. This interpretation is valuable when understood not as a claim that modern nationalism already existed in its final form, but as an indication that **resistance to colonial domination had deep regional roots**.

## Memory, Commemoration and Historical Legacy

The memory of Dheeran Chinnamalai has continued to be preserved in Kongu Nadu and Tamil Nadu. Statues, memorials, commemorative events, and educational references have contributed to preserving his memory and historical legacy. The supplied material records the establishment of memorial initiatives and the commemoration of his birth and death anniversaries. His legacy has also been incorporated into official historical narratives. Tamil Nadu educational materials place him among the early **resisters to British rule**, while modern accounts continue to discuss his military activities and martyrdom. The continuing commemoration of Chinnamalai indicates that **historical memory is not merely about remembering an individual; it is also about preserving the history of a region's resistance**.

## CONCLUSION

Dheeran Chinnamalai occupies an important place in the history of **early resistance to British colonial expansion in South India**. His **military leadership, association with Tipu Sultan, and resistance from Odanilai** demonstrate his determination to defend regional autonomy. Although the East India Company ultimately defeated his forces through **superior military resources, intelligence and surveillance**, his struggle retained lasting historical significance. His refusal to accept **British authority and taxation** symbolized his opposition to colonial domination. Overall, his legacy highlights the **regional foundations of India's early anti-colonial resistance** and continues to hold an important place in the history of Kongu Nadu.

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