

# Pazhassi Raja

Pazhassi Raja was a prince of the Kottayam Kingdom who led an active resistance against the Kingdom of Mysore and later the British East India Company in the late 18th century. His struggles against the British occupation of Kottayam led to the Cotiote War.

He is popularly known as Kerala Simham (Lion of Kerala) on account of his martial exploits.

This article will provide details about Pazhassi Raja within the context of the IAS Exam.

## Background of Pazhassi Raja

Born as Kerala Verma on 3 January 1753, Pazhassi Raja was a member of the western branch of the Kottayam royal clan. He rose to prominence during the second invasion of Malabar by Hyder Ali in 1773.

Kottayam and the Malabar region in its entirety was a prized possession due to the easy availability 'Black Gold' of the era - Pepper. Thus, the Mysore Kingdom led many incursions into the Malabar region to expand its economic and territorial ambitions.

During the invasion, the erstwhile ruler of Kottayam had fled south to seek asylum in Travancore along with most of the royal family. This made Kerala Varma *de facto* ruler of the Kottayam Kingdom. Staying on the fight the invading Mysorean army, he led an active resistance that earned him the admiration of his subjects.

### War Against Mysore (1773 - 1793)

Pazhasi Raja led a guerilla campaign against the occupation of Mysore in order to make up for the lack of weapons and manpower. The hilly and jungle terrain of Wayanad made it ideal to conduct hit and run attacks. One of his first victories came in 1781 when he liberated Thalsaserry fort. It led to a domino effect in which Kottayam itself was liberated but it was not to last.

The Treaty of Mangalore in 1784 following the second Anglo-Mysore War recognised the Malabar region as part of the Mysorian sphere of influence.

This enraged Pazhasi Raja and he continued his resistance against Mysore. The resistance would continue well under the reign of Tipu Sultan, Hyder Ali's successor. The war in the Deccan region had diverted Tipu Sultan's attention away from Malabar for the time being. This enabled Pazhassi Raja to carry out attacks on the Mysorean army with impunity.

In 1791 He signed an agreement with the British East India Company (Founded on December 31 1600) that promised support against Mysore in return for the independence of Kottayam.

This agreement would prove to be useless when Tipu Sultan would be eventually defeated in the Third Anglo-Mysore War and the subsequent treaty of Srirangapatnam would cede Malabar to British control.

## War Against the British East India Company

The British installed Veera Verma, an uncle of Pazhassi Raja was made the ruler of Kottayam under their vassalage. Then they proceeded to make new laws regarding the cultivation of pepper which heavily burdened the peasantry with new taxes. Concerned about the exploitation of his people at the hands of the British, Pazhassi Raja led an uprising against them, beginning in 1793.

The ongoing campaign frustrated the British enough to send an army from Bombay to punish the Raja. His palace was sacked but he managed to flee into the forests of Wayanad in time. From his base in the forest, the Raja undertook several campaigns to fight against the British attacking them in their forts and recruiting the local people regardless of caste and creed.

It was on 18th March 1797 when a decisive victory against the East India Company was scored. An army under Major Cameron was marching through the Periya Ghat when it was ambushed by Pazhassi Raja's army and annihilated completely. This victory put the British on the back foot as they already had their hands full with Tipu and the Marathas in the north, the French in the East and in Europe itself. They concluded a peace treaty with Pazhassi Raja which restored his lands and ended the conflict

But the peace would not last when upon the defeat of Tipu Sultan in the Fourth-Anglo Mysore war turned, British attention towards Wayanad in 1799. Fresh hostilities would break out in 1800 between Pazhassi Raja and the British Army. This time his adversary would be Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, infamous for his defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte. Arthur launched a pincer campaign to capture the Raja but he managed to getaway.

The devastating guerilla campaign launched by the Pazhassi Raja would tie down Arthur's forces and cause massive casualties on the British forces. In his dispatches to England, Arthur Wellesley asserted that as long as Pazhassi Raja remained alive, it would be difficult for the British to win. Due to the Napoleonic Wars of Europe in full swing, the Duke of Wellington would return to England in 1804, his campaign against Pazhassi Raja incomplete. The guerilla tactics he had witnessed from his rival would be used by him when fighting Napoleon's army in Spain to great effect.

Having learnt their lesson the British carried out a policy of repression and bribery to either terrorise the local populace from aiding the Raja or incentivize them into betraying him. Although the repression only served to spur the locals into supporting the Raja, the bribery campaign was more effective as local traitors supplied information of the Raja's location. On one occasion he

was narrowly captured but managed to slip away. His commanders were not so lucky as a few of them were betrayed and executed by the British dealing a severe blow to the rebel army.

But Pazhassi Raja's luck finally ran out on 30th November 1805 when his location was betrayed to the British. The Raja and his retainers were camped close to Kerala-Karnataka border on the shore of a stream named Mavila or Mavila Tod when they were caught by surprise. Intense but short fighting followed. The heavy fighting led to the death of the Raja. Out of respect for their valorous opponent, the British cremated his body with full military honours.

## Legacy of Pazhassi Raja

For his spirited resistance against the British, Kerala Verma Pazhassi Raja remains a resolute symbol of freedom. To this day songs of his exploits are still sung in North Malabar. Many educational institutions in the state of Kerala are still named after him.

Modern historians consider him different from other rulers of the time because Pazhassi Raja had no selfish motive of personal power. He is described as an altruistic personality who upheld the interests of his subjects and country over his personal interest, while being duty-bound to protect his subjects from exploitation and oppression.