

## **KARAIKAL FREEDOM STRUGGLE**

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*“The Grossest Crime for a man is to remain a slave; and the heinous crime for a man is to compromise with inequity or injustice”*

..... Netaji Subash Chandra Bose

The Study of the freedom movement in the Indian Subcontinent has always for focus, British India. Scholars had hardly paid any attention to the study of the growth of the Freedom movement from French Colonial Rule. The Freedom Movement from French India comprised of five territories, Pondicherry, Mahe, Karaikal, Yanam and Chandernagore. Karaikal, an enclave of the Union Territory of Pondicherry. It is in the Cholamandalam lying between the taluks of Mayiladuthurai, Nannilam and Nagapattinam in the Tanjavur district of Tamil Nadu and the Bay of Bengal.

Karaikal started its freedom movement not after the India's freedom in 1947 for it began its struggle from 16<sup>th</sup> February 1934, when Mahatma Gandhi visited it, the seed for nationalism and freedom was sown in the minds of people of Karaikal. The prominent personalities who struggled for its freedom need to be mentioned with great respect. S. Arangasamy Naickar of Tirunalar, Karai Ponnuthambi, Leon Saint Jean, Joseph Xavery, Syed Ahmed, V. Thangavel Pillai, Vyande Pazhanoor of Kottucherry, R.M. Govindasamichettiar, C.Kathaperumal pillai of Ponpethi, V.Krishnamurthy Iyer, R.RamaSrinivasan, S.K.Subbarayan.

The burning patriotic fervour to merge with Indian Union made the freedom fighters to wear badges and hold Indian National Flags, and placed placards which contained the slogans like “We don't want referendum, we want merger with Indi and French Colonialism quit, don't curb Civil liberties as Independence is our Birth right”.

Press too played a vital role in spreading the spirit of merger and freedom. The Tamil dailies viz “The Dinamani, The Swadesa Mitran, The Dinathanthi, The Bharatha Devi, The Nava India, the Tamil weeklies ,The Kalki, The Ananda Vikatan and the English Dailies viz, The Hindu, The Indian Express, The Karai Mail, The National Herald, The Amrita Bazaar. The Press Trust of India and the United Press of India was so great. Journals like Kudi Arasu, The Free India Publications of Madras published a booklet by name “The French Pockets in India”.

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The struggle for freedom came to an end by the referendum held at Kizhur, an adjoining Indian region near Pondicherry on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October 1954. 170 out of 178 participants voted in favour of merger with Indian union where as 8 persons expressed their willingness for the continuance of the French rule. Accordingly, the French agreed to effect the de facto transfer of French establishments to the Government of India was signed in New Delhi on October 21, 1954, which came into effect on the 1<sup>st</sup> November 1954. Shri. R.K. Nehru, the then Foreign Secretary to the Government of India was deputed to Pondicherry to take over the administration from Monseigneur. Pierre Landy. Shri. Kewal Singh was appointed as the first Chief Commissioner of Pondicherry. Mon. Boucheney resigned from being administrator of Karaikal, Shri. A.V. Lognathan, as the first administrator of Karaikal. The people of Karaikal celebrated the historic occasion by decorating their houses with, flags and festoons.

Like the whining schoolboy with his satchel, creeping like a snail unwillingly to school, the French left Pondicherry for France. Shrieks of joy and jubilation were heard throughout the regions of Pondicherry. Guns were fired to honour the Indian National Flag that went up the Government House. And the ceremony marked the end of the 280 year old French rule.

Thus, Karaikal which may be popular for its **Alwaa**, struggled to the maximum to achieve its independence from the French. Its contribution towards freedom stands testimony to the fact that ideals and principles rather than power and profit can be great motivating factors in the struggle for freedom and the manifestation of nationalism.

**Introduction:**

The study of the growth of freedom movement in India has always focused on British India. Many interesting works have been published on this subject. But scholars have never given enough importance to the growth of freedom movement and nationalism in French India<sup>1</sup>. With the announcement of the dawn of freedom to India on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of August 1947, from the British yoke, the continuance of French colonialism in some dots on the coast lines of India was felt as an anomaly and also against the security of India. So, a great wave of enthusiasm and zeal began to creep into the minds of the young men to rise up against the French colonial rule over the tiny pockets of Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe, Yanam and Chandranagore in India<sup>2</sup>. The sole purpose of the existence of an establishment as productive as Karaikal was to cater to the needs of the French, as for the other enclaves, they were the object of contempt of the arrogant Pondicherrian society who viewed them as nothing more than currency of exchange for the enlargement of the territory of the capital of French India<sup>3</sup>. Realising the fact, Karaikalist started their revolt against the colonialist, though very late but with the firm mind to achieve freedom<sup>4</sup>. The freedom movement resulted in various agitation. The present article will spot and trace its importance throughout the struggle. The study will also highlight the spread of national awakening and the role of Karaikal to merge with Indian Union.

**KARAIKAL :**

Situated at the confluence of Arisilar (one of the 7 tributaries of River Caveri) and the Bay of Bengal, Karaikal was within the confines of the Kingdom of Tanjore<sup>5</sup>. Karaikal is an enclave of the Union Territory of Pondicherry. It is on the Cholamandalam lying between the taluks of Mayiladurai, Nannilam and Nagapatinam<sup>6</sup>.

### Genesis of Karaikal :

Karaikal constituted an important town long before the French acquired it. It has found a place in the religious history of the country on account of the famed Karaikal Ammaiyar who is dated to the fifth century<sup>7</sup>. Sekkizhar's magnum-opus the Periyapuram, composed in the twelfth century is the chief source of information for the history of Karaikal during this period. He describes the town, the many vessels of commerce on the coast and the excellent accommodation which its port had, in dealing with sea-borne trade thus: "Karaikal was a flourishing sea-port in which, borne by the billowing waves, the curved 'chanks' travelled far inland up the creeks". He also speaks of the "molluses and wild vegetation" abounding the coastline, adding to the richness of Karaikal ; the living therein, of merchant citizens who were righteous and who served not a whit from truthfulness; the existence of palatial castles and buildings; in short, the prosperity of Karaikal in those days. Above all, his naming Punitavaiar as "Karaikal Ammaiyar" after the town proves to the hilt, that Karaikal had already been famous<sup>8</sup>. Then there are the famous Kasakkudi copper plates of Nandivarman II Pallavamalla 731 to 796 discovered in 1879 by Jules de la Fon, of Pondicherry, which have assumed special significance in the context of their being found at Kasakkudi, in Karaikal. The inclusion of Karaikal in the Pallava kingdom is, therefore, a matter of certainty<sup>9</sup>.

The famous Leyden Grant of Chola Rajaraja the Great, dated to his twenty first regnal year of 1006 , is a conspicuous Chola charter on copper plates, which has the mention that Rajaraja made a grant of the village Anaimangalam to the Buddhist to constructed Chudamani Varma Vihara, and in 1017, his son Rajendra Gangaikondan confirmed to the grant. This grant contains the fact that to the west of this monastery lay "the big road to Karaikal". This expression is an eloquent testimony to the fact that in those days Karaikal enjoyed greater prominence than the ports of Nagore or Tirumalairajanpattinam. Since the highway has been named after Karaikal<sup>10</sup>. Jouveau Dubreuil\*\* concludes that Karaikal was ' *la capitale due pays au nord de Negapatam*'<sup>11</sup>. There is another evidence ---- a script on the wall of the famous Brihadeswara temple at Tanjavur, mentioning the name of a dancing girl belonging to Karaikal. This strengthens the belief that Karaikal did not lag behind in the art of Bharata Natyam<sup>12</sup>.

### Advent of French Rule in Karaikal :

The history of Karaikal is silent for over a century from the second quarter of the seventeenth century. She was under the Dutch from 1674 to 1676 and the French had it since 1688. The French Governors in Pondicherry who had long coveted this fertile patch in the most fertile Tanjavur cherished the hope of founding a settlement therein, possessed Karaikal for the first time in December 1688 when Francois Martin occupied a 'loge' (Trade Post)<sup>13</sup>. But they were not destined to hold it beyond June 1689 thanks to the jealousies of the Dutch at Nagapattinam<sup>14</sup>. The actual grant of Karaikal to the French was not made till 1730. There is however some doubt as to the exact date when the French settled at Karaikal.

The ruler of Tanjavur by name Tukoji died in February, 1738. As a result his son Saiyaji fled to Tanjavur with a company of a few frustrated friends and crossed the river Coleroon to take refuge in the temple at Chidambaram. This hiding place was only 24 miles from Pondicherry Monsieur Dumas the then Governor of Pondicherry. By way of recompense from the French support to recover Tanjavur, Saiyaji offered the town of Karaikal, the fort of Karukkalacheri (written also as Kircan Guree and Karcangary) ten villages adjacent to them

and all the lands depending upon them against 25,000 pagodas to the French. Negotiations were made. Both the French and Saiyaji approved and signed the deal on 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1738<sup>15</sup>.

The entire population was delighted on receiving the news. Later on, Saiyaji turned his mind and refused the help of the French as he was able to re-usurp these places. The news was received with much sadness by the French. So all the French troops returned to Pondicherry after a long wait at Karaikal. But situation changed as Chanda Sahib urged Dumas, the then French Governor of Pondicherry to capture Karaikal through force. Dumas preferred diplomacy to military action. With the help of Chanda Sahib, Karaikal fell into the hands of the French. On 14<sup>th</sup> February, 1739 the French National Flag was hoisted<sup>16</sup>.

After taking possession of Karaikal and its adjacent villages in 1739, Golard set himself to the task of organizing the new territory. His first and foremost act was to introduce the Catholic Cult in Karaikal. As per an agreement made with Jesuits on 4<sup>th</sup> June, 1739 two priests were sent to Karaikal as Chaplains<sup>17</sup>. From 1739 to 1760 the French possession of Karaikal did not encounter any serious problem. It had such able administrators as Le Riche and his successors, Louis Barthelemy and Porcherr Ourche. The French got more and more number of villages added to these territories from time to time as the Rajas of Tanjavur took successive loans from the former<sup>18</sup>. Thus by 1741 Karaikal had become an important integral part of the French possessions in India.

#### **Karaikal in Freedom Struggle from the French Rule :**

The feeling of Nationalism and spirit of freedom from the colonial rule came to the minds of Karaikal region much before the hearts of Pondicherry region people, which was the main seat of the power of French. Karaikal freedom fighters were responsible for the conduct of various movements in the local areas. The leaders of different organisation and societies of the region have consolidated the feelings of fighters and led the freedom struggle in Karaikal and Pondicherry too.

#### **Historical importance of Gandhiji's visits to Karaikal :**

It was on 23rd January 1934 Gandhiji started his Harijan Tour in Tamil Nadu from the point of the southern most end of the sub continent, Kanyakumari which was under the jurisdiction of the then Travancore Princely State<sup>19</sup>. Gandhiji reached Nagapatinam on 15<sup>th</sup> February 1934, at 8 p.m. in the evening. Addresses and purses were presented by the Nagapatinam Harijan Sevak Sangh to Gandhiji. He stayed in the night at Nagapatinam and left for Karaikal in the early morning of 16th February<sup>20</sup>. On the way at Nagore, the holy pilgrim centre of the Muslims, an address and a purse were presented to him. At Karaikal Gandhiji addressed the people of Karaikal in a place called Arisilar. He said that there was no warrant for untouchability in the Hindu Shastras. He further told that he was very glad to see the crowd of men and women and the purses and gifts they had offered, testified to the fact that they did not believe in untouchability. Harijan Sevak Sangh leader of Karaikal Arangaswamy Naicker and Conseil-General Thiagaraja pillai presented Rs.1001 as fund<sup>21</sup>.

#### **First movement of Freedom Struggle at Karaikal :**

The fiery speech of Gandhiji brought commendable courage in Karaikal as it was exhibited by them when the Government of French imposed Poll – tax. In 1938, the French Government

enacted a legislation to levy from the British Indians in French Settlement a poll-tax of twenty rupees per head per year. This tax was not imposed upon any French Indian residing or doing business in British India. The worse part of the imposition was, the penalties for non-conformity to these conditions, amounted to imprisonment ranging from two to six months and a fine of 200 francs<sup>22</sup>. Prominent citizens of Karaikal, who were piqued by this move, resolved to oppose the Government. Protest meetings were held everywhere in Karaikal, A.M.Madar Sahib Maricar, Secretary, Karaikal Merchants' Association took the lead. M.Ahmad Nainar Maricar an active member of the Mahajana Sabha of Karaikal issued statement to the press<sup>23</sup>. V. Subbiah, a popular labour leader protested and was charged as an undesirable element and was expelled from Pondicherry. Karaikal triumphed over the alien Government. The French Government never levied the poll-tax which their own Minister for Colonies characterized as "inopportune" and "impolite"<sup>24</sup>. Thus the first struggle against the French colonial rule came to be a grand success to Karaikal.

#### Role of parties towards freedom :

- a. **Karaikal National Congress (K.N.C):** The Nationalist minded in Karaikal organised on 22<sup>nd</sup> August, 1946, the "Karaikal National Congress" whose declared object was complete independence of all French possessions and their integration into the Indian Union. Its activities were guided only by the Indian National Congress. It was inaugurated in June 1946, in the presence of K. Kamaraj, President of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee and Aruna Asaf Ali who had just emerged from under-ground "with the halo of a national leader". On 13<sup>th</sup> March the K.N.C passed their first resolution signifying their resolve to fight for merger of their establishment with the Indian Union<sup>25</sup>.
- b. **The French India Socialist Party:** This party was headed by Edouard Goubert, a highly influential Franco – Indian and a former judicial officer. Its object being the maintenance of French sovereignty permanently, the party was opposed to the ideal liberation of French India and its fusion into greater India. Pledged to create panic among the people and to freeze, if it could, the national spirit, the party had no relations with the Socialist Party of either India or of France. Openly supported by the Government, it publicly stated that while joining the Indian Union would be highly suicidal in the interests of French Indians, their opting for membership in French Union would confer on them manifold advantages and a state of importance.<sup>26</sup>.
- c. **Karaikal Youth Congress:** In the year 1952, Youth Congress was formed with sole aim of offering Satyagraha against the French under the Presidentship of R.Ramasrinivasan. Public meetings, hartals, picketing were conducted, youngsters like Panneerselvam, M.Marimuthu offered satyagraha by holding the Indian National Flags in their hands, these were beaten severely by the police and put behind the bars<sup>27</sup>.
- d. **Merger Congress:** Karaikal people brought out a new party called the Merger Congress, after the visit of N.V.Raj Kumar, Foreign Secretary, Indian National Congress to the Settlement. Joseph Xavery, a leading advocate of Karaikal was its President started Merger Congress on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1949, Leon Saint Jean and Srikanta Ramanujam its Vice-Presidents<sup>28</sup>. The

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party demanded vehemently the immediate merger of the French Settlements with the Indian Union. They intensified the freedom movement in Karaikal exhorting the people to defy the French Government. “Quit India” agitation was daily gathering momentum in Karaikal. The Government of India thereupon proposed to the French Government in October 1952, that they should restart negotiations for the direct transfer of the French territories to India<sup>29</sup>.

**Contributions’ by Freedom Fighters of Karaikal :**

- a. ‘*French-Indian Gandhi*’ S.Arangasamy Naicker: In the year 1884 at Elayankudi of Karaikal S.Arangasamy Naicker was born. He fought for the rights of Harijan and downtrodden people. He was the Mayor of Thirunallar Commune. He dug many wells for the welfare of Harijans. In 1930 he actively participated in the Salt Satyagraha at Vedaranyam. He was the editor of *Kudiyarasu*, the weekly journal which criticized the anti-democratic policy and colonial atrocities of the French Government<sup>30</sup>. He also issued pamphlets such as Arisanam, Uyerppali, Soundravalliammankal, Thiruvarangachieviyarivuru, Arangavarivuru. He published a book entitled *Erimalai* written by Savarkar. Throughout his life he followed the principles of Gandhiji. Naicker was the host of Gandhiji and Nehru during their visit to Karaikal. In 1946, he allowed people of Harijans to go near Garbagirha of Dharbaneeswar temple which was opposed by upper castes of Karaikal<sup>31</sup>. On 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947, he hoisted the Indian flag at Thirumalairayanpattinam Commune which was retaliated by the French through suspending him for mayor ship. His active participation in the freedom struggle earned him the title “French – Indian Gandhi” . He breathed his last on 24<sup>th</sup> December 1948<sup>32</sup>.
- b. ‘*Karaivelan*’ Leon Saint Jean: He was a profound patriot and a man of indomitable courage, who was largely instrumental in organizing an agitation against imperialist exploitation. He was first elected unopposed in December 1946 to the Representative Assembly from the Tirunallar constituency<sup>33</sup>. In the middle of 1948, he turned a staunch advocate of the merger cause. Since, he too was the member of *Kudiyarasu*, a Tamil Weekly, through which he cultivated the zeal for freedom in the minds of people so they called him as *Karaivelan*<sup>34</sup>. He moved a resolution for immediate merger of the French Settlements with the Indian Union in the Representative Assembly in April 1949. On 26 March 1954, to enhance the spirit of freedom in the minds of people he insisted them to hoist Indian National Flag at every house. Under his leadership there went a procession of people holding the Merger Flag on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1954. He was fined 100 francs and sentenced to 3 months of imprisonment for the atrocities he created to get the freedom from the French<sup>35</sup>. The Administrator who came to the spot, tried in vain to prevail on them. When the demonstrators refused to disperse even at the intervention of the armed police, the latter tore off the Indian tri-colour flags seizing them forcibly from the demonstrators and freely resorting to lathi charges<sup>36</sup>. Leon Saint Jean proved himself as a true *Karaivelan*.
- c. ‘*Karai Ponnuthambipillai*’ Marie Savery Pillai: In Pondicherry Ponnu Thambi Pillai was called ‘*La Porte*’ meaning *the door*. The door to open the way for the assimilation of the natives with the French<sup>37</sup>. Similar to him Marie Savery Pillai was named as *Karai Ponnuthambipillai* in Karaikal, being an advocate in the court of Karaikal wanted to wear the dress like Gandhiji, Khadi dhoti and Shirt but he was not allowed to do so and was denied entry to the court. So he complained to the Governor of Pondicherry and was received justice to wear the clothes of his interest as well as the natives of Karaikal, received great respect then

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on by the French<sup>38</sup>. Karai Ponnuthambipillai was known for his tremendous courage in the history of Karaikal. While returning from Paris after his completion of studies he brought some rifles on the instigation of the revolutionary V.V. Subramany Iyer, hiding them in the suitcase with the books. That was the rifle used later to kill Collector Ash at Maniyatchi by the hero Vanjinathan<sup>39</sup>.

- d. *Veteran Freedom Fighter* R. Ramasrinivasan : He was the President of Karaikal Youth Congress<sup>40</sup>. Agitations and hartals were organized by him throughout Karaikal. The pro-merger parties under the captaincy of Ramasrinivasan on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1954 began an economic blockade around the borders of Karaikal which paralysed life in Karaikal considerably as daily necessities had to come from the adjoining Indian borders. Mails to Post offices within the French territory were deposited in the nearest Union Post Offices. Railways authorities at Peralam were requested not to dispatch goods to Karaikal. Volunteers squatted on the railway track. Warrants of arrests were issued against Ramasrinivasan and his brother Kandakumar, and were kept behind the bars for one month<sup>41</sup>. While sentencing him Judge Hubert de Rozario remarked in French “Votre tete est brulee” (your brains are to be blown out)<sup>42</sup>. By his ardent effort Karaikal was able to attain her freedom from French. Even after merger Ramasrinivasan still continues the fight against the present Indian Government to declare Karaikal as separate Union Territory<sup>43</sup>.

**Other prominent freedom fighters of Karaikal against French rule:**

Apart from those mentioned, others like Vok. Ganapthia Pillai, Viswanathier, Meri Savari, S.Varadarajulu Chettiar, A. Ramanathan Chettiar, Ambikasundaramurthi, N.Thangaraju, S.Mani, S.Ramaswamy Iyer (alias) Radja Iyer, R.Ganapthy Iyer, S.Rangaswamy Pillai, Joseph Zaveri, G.Loganathan, M.Ramaswamy, Meenakshisundaram, M.Selvaraj, A.Poyyadamurthi and K.Raghavaswamy were great nationalist and patriots who deserve kudos for their spirit of self sacrifice and adherence to the Gandhian policy of non-violence in the face of grace provocation<sup>44</sup>.

**Participation of Press :**

Press too played a vital role in spreading the spirit of merger and freedom. The Tamil dailies viz “The Dinamani, The Swadesa Mitran, The Dinathanthi, The Bharatha Devi, The Nava India, the Tamil weeklies, The Kalki, The Ananda Vikatan acted as fuel to the burning freedom fire<sup>45</sup>. The English Dailies viz, The Hindu, The Indian Express, The Karai Mail, The National Herald, The Amrita Bazaar enabled the French administrators to understand the minds of the people. The Press Trust of India and the United Press of India was so great in propagating the ideas of freedom<sup>46</sup>. Journal like Kudiarasu, The Free India Publications of Madras published a booklet by name “The French Pockets in India” to educate the Karaikal people about the merger with Indian Union and contained photographs of the leaders who were active towards the main cause of merger<sup>47</sup>.

**Final Hurdle to achieve freedom and Merger with Indian Union :**

The struggle for freedom came to end by the referendum held at Kizhur, an adjoining Indian region near Pondicherry on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October 1954. 170 out of 178 participants voted in favour of merger with Indian union where as 8 persons expressed their willingness for the continuance

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of the French rule<sup>48</sup>. Accordingly, the French agreed to effect the 'De Facto' transfer of French establishments to the Government of India was signed in New Delhi on October 21, 1954, which came into effect on the 1<sup>st</sup> November 1954<sup>49</sup>. Shri. R.K. Nehru, the then Foreign Secretary to the Government of India was deputed to Pondicherry to take over the administration from Monsieur. Pierre Landy. Shri. Kewal Singh was appointed as the first Chief Commissioner of Pondicherry<sup>50</sup>. Mon. Boucheney resigned from being administrator of Karaikal, Shri. A.V. Lognathan, as the first administrator of Karaikal<sup>51</sup>. The people of Karaikal celebrated the historic occasion by decorating their houses with, flags and festoons.

Like the whining schoolboy with his satchel, creeping like a snail unwillingly to school, the French left Pondicherry for France. Shrieks of joy and jubilation were heard throughout the regions of Pondicherry. Guns were fired to honour the Indian National Flag that went up the Government House. And the ceremony marked the end of the 280 year old French rule<sup>52</sup>.

After the merger Karaikal was visited by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in October 1955, in which he said "I have not come here to invite you for soft living but to ask you to undertake this great adventure in our country"<sup>53</sup>. The De facto transfer of power was confirmed on August 16, 1962 when a team of 39 administrators took charge of Pondicherry State. Divided into 16 communes, Pondicherry was declared a Union territory. This day is known as 'De Jure'<sup>54</sup>.

**Conclusion :**

Thus, Karaikal which may be popular for its 'Alwaa', struggled to the maximum to achieve its independence from the French. Its contribution towards freedom stands testimony to the fact that ideals and principles rather than power and profit can be great motivating factors in the struggle for freedom and the manifestation of nationalism.

Although the political link was snapped off the cultural relations between the French and the Indians acquired new expression. The privilege of dual citizenship conferred upon the Franco-Indians assured France of a durable link with the erstwhile establishment. The political heroes of the Merger Movement reiterated their promises before charmed crowds. The French would henceforth be safely tucked away in the pages of history.

**Footnotes and References:**

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5. Raja & RitaNath Keshari,*Glimpses of Pondicherry*,Pondicherry,2005,p.111, The other tributaries of Kaveri are the Nandalar,Nattar,Tirumularajanar,Mudikondanar,Vanjiyar and Noolar, the name Arisilar has the divine origin as related in the Karaikal Sthalavaralaru is as follows: When Mahavishnu performed abhisek for Siva at Tejneervanam, the river Kaveri, in obedience to the former's call readily flowed there. An elated Mahavishnu called her

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Harinadi – the river of Hari (Arinadi in Tamil) and her distributary Harisollar (Hari+Sol+Aar) as the river flowed there in response to the call of Hari. Arisilar is the corrupt form of Arisollar, also see Saroja Sundarajan, *Glimpses of the History of Karaikal*, Madras, 1985, pp. 1-3.

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45. Ramasrinivasan, *op.cit.*, p.19.
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50. Ramasrinivasan, *op.cit.*, p.115.
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53. *Speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Vol.III, pp.461-65 also see *The Hindu*, 5 October, 1955.
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