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Dheeran Chinnamalai: The Kongu Chieftain Who Refused to Bend

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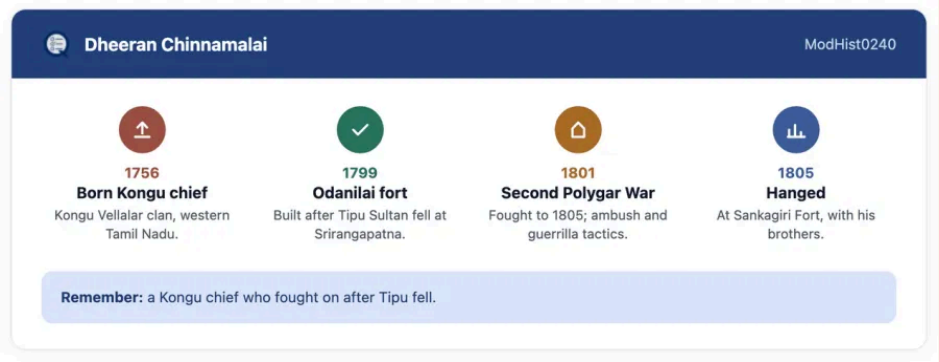
He learned gunnery from French officers. He fought beside Tipu Sultan. Then he turned those skills against the East India Company and held out for years.

This is Dheeran Chinnamalai, the chieftain of the Kongu country in western Tamil Nadu. His story is part of the Second Polygar War.



A statue of Dheeran Chinnamalai. Photo: Invisiblemaniac, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.



Four turning points in the life of Dheeran Chinnamalai.

Born. 17 April 1756, as Theerthagiri Sarkarai Manradiar.
Clan. Kongu Vellalar of western Tamil Nadu.
Stronghold. The Odanilai fort.
War. Second Polygar War, 1801 to 1805.
Place of death. Sankagiri Fort.
Died. 1805; sources differ on the exact day.

Polygar (poligar): a local chieftain of the Tamil country who held land and kept soldiers.

Kongu country: the western Tamil region around present-day Erode and Coimbatore.

Guerrilla warfare: fighting by quick raids and ambushes instead of open battle.

1 Who was Dheeran Chinnamalai?

He was born on 17 April 1756 as Theerthagiri Sarkarai Manradiar. His family belonged to the Kongu Vellalar clan. Sources differ on the exact village. They place it near Kangeyam or Chennimalai.

The Kongu region lay between the Mysore kingdom and the Tamil plains. Mysore collected taxes there. Young Chinnamalai first opposed those tax collectors.

The name Chinnamalai is a title, not a birth name. Popular accounts link it to the hills of Sennimalai and Shivamalai, which he held.

- Born **17 April 1756** as **Theerthagiri Sarkarai Manradiar**.
- From a **Kongu Vellalar** clan of western **Tamil Nadu**.
- First opposed **Mysore's** tax collection in the Kongu region.

> **Quick check 1.** Dheeran Chinnamalai fought for the Company against Tipu Sultan. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 How did he fight beside Tipu Sultan?

Why did a Kongu chieftain side with Mysore? The answer is simple. Both wanted to stop the Company from taking over the south. An old quarrel over taxes mattered less than that.

Later he joined Tipu Sultan against the East India Company. The Company was the common enemy. Mysore itself was now fighting for survival.

Accounts say he raised a force of about one thousand men. They also say he learned European-style musket and cannon drill from French officers in Tipu's service. Treat these details as tradition, since records are thin.

He fought in the Srirangapatna region, where Tipu's capital stood. Tipu Sultan fell there in 1799. After that, the Kongu chieftain went home to Odanilai and built a fort.

- Allied with **Tipu Sultan** against the **Company**.

- Said to have trained under **French officers**.
- Tipu fell at **Srirangapatna** in **1799**.
- Chinnamalai then built a fort at **Odanilai**.
- Read about Mysore under Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan and the Anglo-Mysore Wars.

3 How did he fight the Second Polygar War?

The Second Polygar War ran from 1801 to 1805. It began after the first Polygar rising was crushed. Veerapandiya Kattabomman had already been hanged in 1799.

Chinnamalai became one of its commanders in the west. He used ambush and surprise. Popular accounts say he won fights at the Cauvery in 1801, at Odanilai in 1802, and at Arachalur in 1804.

Later his army was beaten. He escaped from the Company forces and kept moving. Some accounts say he fought from hill country near Palani.

Traditions also link him to a wider southern alliance with Marudu Pandiyan of Sivaganga and Gopala Nayak. Historians still debate how organised that alliance was.

- The war lasted from **1801** to **1805**.
- Said victories: **Cauvery 1801**, **Odanilai 1802**, **Arachalur 1804**.
- Switched to **guerrilla warfare** after losses.
- Read about Kattabomman and Puli Thevar.

> **Quick check 2.** Chinnamalai was hanged at Sankagiri Fort in 1805. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

4 How did his resistance end?

Local tradition says he was betrayed by his own cook, Nallapan. It says the Company paid for the betrayal. It also says he was seized at a meal.

This story is told widely, but written proof is slim. Use it with care.

What is firmer is the ending. He was hanged at Sankagiri Fort in 1805, along with his two brothers. Some accounts add his commander Karuppan.

Sources differ on the day. Most give 31 July. Wikipedia gives 2 August in its text and 3 August in its heading line. Exam questions usually name only the year 1805.

- Tradition: betrayed by his cook **Nallapan**.
- Hanged at **Sankagiri Fort** in **1805**.

- His **two brothers** were hanged with him.
- Death date: **31 July**, **2 August** or **3 August** in different sources.

5 How is he remembered?

Statues of him stand at Chennai, Tiruchirappalli, Erode and Odanilai.

India Post issued a commemorative stamp on 31 July 2005. That marked two hundred years since his death.

Until 1997 the Tiruchirappalli division of the state bus corporation carried his name. The Erode district collectorate and the Erode Municipal Corporation are also named after him.

His story also shows how widely the resistance spread. The south did not rise only in 1857. Many chieftains fought long before that, each in their own region.

Today people in the Kongu country honour him as a local hero who refused to submit.

- Statues at **Chennai**, **Tiruchirappalli**, **Erode** and **Odanilai**.
- Commemorative stamp on **31 July 2005**.
- The **Erode** collectorate and corporation carry his name.

6 What are the exam traps?

Three confusions come up often.

- The **Second** Polygar War (1801 to 1805) is not the first war of **Kattabomman**.
- Chinnamalai was a **Kongu** chieftain in the west, not a southern poligar like **Puli Thevar**.
- He is a **title**; the birth name was **Theerthagiri**.

- Do not rely on the **exact date** of death; know the year, **1805**.

Remember: Chinnamalai trained with Tipu's army, built Odanilai, fought the Second Polygar War and was hanged at Sankagiri in 1805.

> **Think it through:** Why did Chinnamalai switch from a fort to guerrilla war?
>
> A fort is a fixed target. Once the Company brought heavy cannon, walls could be broken. A moving band was harder to find and hit.

> **Quick check 3.** The Second Polygar War was fought in 1857. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. Before leading his own resistance, Dheeran Chinnamalai raised a 1,000-strong army in support of which ruler?

A. Hyder Ali

B. Tipu Sultan

C. The Nizam of Hyderabad

D. The Maratha Peshwa

See answer ↓

2. Dheeran Chinnamalai fought in the Second Polygar War, defeating British forces at Cauvery, Odanilai, and which other battle in 1804?

A. Srirangapatna

B. Vellore

C. Panchalankurichi

D. Arachalur

See answer ↓

3. At which fort was Dheeran Chinnamalai taken after his capture, and where a British tribunal demanded he accept Company rule?

A. Palakkad Fort

B. Vellore Fort

C. Sankagiri Fort

D. Gingee Fort

See answer ↓

4. In which year did Dheeran Chinnamalai defeat British forces at Odanilai, the site of his own fortified stronghold?

A. 1804

B. 1805

C. 1802

D. 1799

See answer ↓

5. In which year was Dheeran Chinnamalai born?

A. 1739

B. 1801

C. 1756

D. 1769

See answer ↓

6. India Post released a stamp for Dheeran Chinnamalai in which year?

A. 1997

B. 2005

C. 2001

D. 1947

See answer ↓

7. The district collectorate and the municipal corporation named after Dheeran Chinnamalai are at which place?

A. Thanjavur

B. Salem

C. Erode

D. Madurai

See answer ↓

8. Dheeran Chinnamalai belonged to which clan of western Tamil Nadu?

A. Maravar

B. Nadar

C. Kallar

D. Kongu Vellalar

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** He raised the army in support of Tipu Sultan, fighting in battles including Srirangapatna, before Tipu's death in 1799. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** He defeated British forces at Arachalur in 1804, part of a string of victories during the Second Polygar War. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** After capture, Chinnamalai was taken to Sankagiri Fort, where a tribunal of four British officers demanded he pay taxes and accept Company rule. He refused. ↑ Q3
4. **C.** Chinnamalai defeated British forces at Odanilai in 1802, part of a run of victories in the Second Polygar War that also included Cauvery (1801) and Arachalur (1804). ↑ Q4
5. **C.** Dheeran Chinnamalai was born on 17 April 1756 as Theerthagiri Sarkarai Manradiar, in the Kongu country. ↑ Q5
6. **B.** The stamp came out on 31 July 2005, marking two hundred years since his death in 1805. ↑ Q6
7. **C.** The Erode district collectorate and the Erode Municipal Corporation carry his name, in the Kongu country. ↑ Q7
8. **D.** He was born in a Kongu Vellalar family in the Kongu region of western Tamil Nadu. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1
2. **True.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3

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