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Pazhassi Raja: The Lion of Kerala

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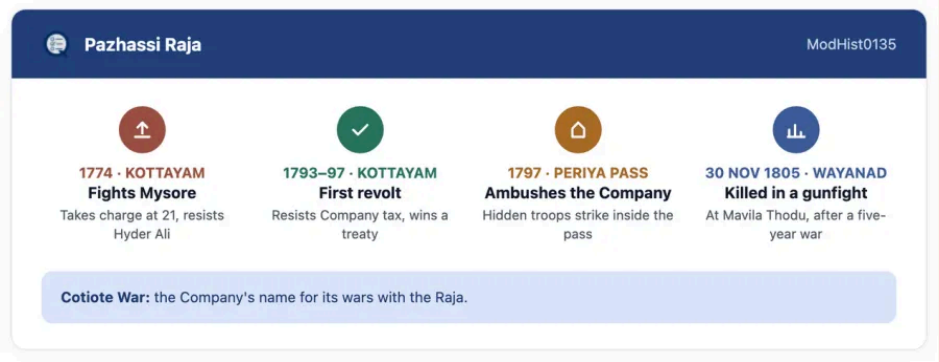
Pazhassi Raja fought Mysore, then the East India Company, for more than thirty years. He is remembered as the Lion of Kerala.

His weapon was the forest. His men struck from the hills of Wayanad and vanished again.



Pazhassi Raja, painted by Raja Ravi Varma in 1898. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



Four turning points in the life of Pazhassi Raja.

> **Born.** 3 January 1753.
> **Real name.** Kerala Varma, called Pazhassi after his home place.
> **Kingdom.** Kottayam, in north Malabar.
> **First revolt.** 1793 to 1797.
> **Second revolt.** 1800 to 1805.
> **Died.** 30 November 1805, at Mavila Thodu.

Cotiote War: the Company's name for its wars with Pazhassi Raja. It comes from "Kottayam".

Guerrilla war: war by ambush and surprise, instead of open battle.

Wayanad: a forested hill region in north Kerala, the Raja's base.

1 Who was Pazhassi Raja?

He was a prince of the royal house of Kottayam.

- His real name was **Kerala Varma**.
- He was born on 3 January 1753.
- He got the name Pazhassi because he was a native of Pazhassi, near Mattannur.

- Early Company papers wrote his name as “Pychy Rajah”.
- They called the kingdom “Cotiote”, the English form of Kottayam.
- He was the de facto head of Kottayam from 1774 until 1805.
- Kottayam lay in north Malabar, in present-day Kerala.
- His kingdom took in Thalassery taluk and the Wayanad area.
- He earned the title **Kerala Simham**, the Lion of Kerala.

> **Quick check 1.** Pazhassi Raja was known as Kerala Simham, the Lion of Kerala. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 How did he fight Mysore?

He fought Mysore before he ever fought the British.

- Hyder Ali of Mysore marched into Malabar in 1773.
- Many rajas fled to Travancore.
- The Raja of Kottayam also took refuge outside the kingdom.
- Pazhassi Raja stayed behind, aged 21, and took charge in 1774.
- He had neither guns nor troops enough for open battle.
- So he set up bases in the forested mountains of Puralimala and Wayanad.
- His troops came from many castes and tribes, including Nairs, Thiyyas and Kurichiyas.
- A treaty of 1786 ceded Wayanad to Tipu Sultan.
- His elder brother, Ravi Varma, had signed that treaty.
- The Raja refused to accept it.
- His guerrilla war in Wayanad went on until **1793**.

- In 1790 he helped the Company against Mysore, with about 1,500 Nairs.

3 What was the first revolt?

A tax dispute led to open conflict with the Company.

- The Treaty of Seringapatam in 1792 gave Malabar to the East India Company.
- The Company had signed a pact with him in 1790, promising to respect Kottayam's independence.
- It broke that promise and put his uncle, Vira Varma, in charge.
- Vira Varma then taxed the peasants heavily.
- In **1793** Pazhassi Raja led the peasants in resistance.
- In 1796 a Company party seized his fortified house at Pazhassi.
- The Raja had left four days earlier.
- He moved to Wayanad and fought back with guerrilla tactics.

- In 1797 his forces ambushed a Company force at **Periya Pass**.
- Hidden troops waited in stockades on both sides of the narrow pass.
- Many Company officers were killed, including Major Cameron.
- After heavy losses, the Company sued for peace in 1797.
- One official noted that Company losses in 1797 exceeded those of the Third Anglo-Mysore War.
- The treaty pardoned him and promised an allowance of 8,000 rupees a year.

4 What was the second revolt?

A new dispute over Wayanad ended the peace.

- Tipu Sultan fell in 1799, and Wayanad passed to the Company.
- The Company planned to join Wayanad to another district.
- The Raja saw this as an attack on his ancient land.
- His second revolt ran from **1800 to 1805**.
- Arthur Wellesley, the future Duke of Wellington, led the Company's forces in the region.
- By 1801 over 10,000 Company troops blocked the passes into Wayanad.
- The Raja had to wander the forests with a few aides.
- His commander, **Edachena Kungan**, led the capture of Panamaram Fort.
- Kurichiya bowmen fought alongside him.
- He also trained peasants for war, so ordinary villagers joined his army.
- In March 1803 rebels even raided the sub-jail at Calicut.

- Wellesley is said to have remarked that the Company was fighting “one man”.
- The Company offered a large reward for the Raja’s capture.

5 How did he die?

His end came near the Karnataka border.

- The Company sent T. H. Baber, a civil servant, to hunt him down.
- An informer told Baber where the Raja had camped.
- On **30 November 1805** the Company troops surprised his camp.
- The place was Mavila Thodu, a stream near Pulpally.
- Six fighters died, and the Raja was among the first.
- Accounts differ on how exactly he died.
- Folklore says he swallowed a diamond ring.
- Baber credited a clerk, Canara Menon.
- His wife was taken prisoner, and the palace at Pazhassi was demolished.
- He is also remembered for helping peasants restart farming after the Mysore wars.
- He lent them money, seeds and cattle.

6 What are the exam traps?

Dates and places are easy to mix up.

- He fought two revolts: **1793 to 1797** and **1800 to 1805**.
- The first revolt was about tax and the control of Kottayam.
- The second revolt was about Wayanad.
- Periya Pass was in 1797. Mavila Thodu was in 1805.

- Pazhassi is a place name, not a personal title.
- He is not the same as the 1921 Malabar rebel Variyamkunnath Kunjahammed Haji.
- Compare his forest war with Tirot Sing in the Khasi Hills.
- Both rose before 1857, like Kittur Chennamma.
- For another Kerala-region figure, see Accamma Cherian.

Quick check 2. Pazhassi Raja was killed at Periya Pass in 1797. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember: Kerala Varma, called Pazhassi Raja. Kottayam. First revolt 1793 to 1797. Periya Pass, 1797. Second revolt 1800 to 1805. Killed at Mavila Thodu on 30 November 1805.

Think it through: Why was forest warfare so useful against a larger, better-armed army?

Large armies depend on supply roads and open ground. In dense forest they could not see their enemy and could not bring in food easily. Local fighters knew every path.

Quick check 3. His second revolt, from 1800 to 1805, was about control of Wayanad. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. Pazhassi Raja's first uprising (1793-97) resisted the East India Company's actions, following its 1792 takeover of Malabar from whom?

A. Tipu Sultan

B. The Zamorin of Calicut

C. Hyder Ali

D. The Nizam of Hyderabad

See answer ↓

2. Pazhassi Raja's second uprising (1800-05) began after the Company annexed which territory, his traditional homeland?

A. Wayanad

B. Cochin

C. Travancore

D. Coorg

See answer ↓

3. Pazhassi Raja earned which epithet for his sustained resistance across both uprisings?

A. Simha Purusha of Wayanad

B. Kerala Simham (Lion of Kerala)

C. Veer Bahadur

D. Sher-e-Punjab

See answer ↓

4. On 30 November 1805, Pazhassi Raja was killed in a gunfight at which place?

A. Periya Pass

B. Mavila Thodu

C. Panamaram

D. Seringapatam

See answer ↓

5. Which 1797 ambush, in which a Company force was badly beaten, was the most important event of Pazhassi Raja's first war?

A. Plassey

B. Panipat

C. Buxar

D. Periya Pass

See answer ↓

6. What name did the East India Company give to its wars against Pazhassi Raja?

A. Poligar War

B. Rohilla War

C. Cotiote War

D. Maratha War

See answer ↓

7. Which future Duke of Wellington commanded Company forces in Malabar and Mysore against Pazhassi Raja?

A. Warren Hastings

B. Lord Cornwallis

C. Lord Dalhousie

D. Arthur Wellesley

See answer ↓

8. Bowmen of which forest community fought alongside Pazhassi Raja in Wayanad?

A. Kurichiyas

B. Gonds

C. Santhals

D. Bhils

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.** The Company took control of Malabar from Tipu Sultan in 1792, then imposed heavy taxes that reduced local rulers to revenue agents. ↑ Q1
2. **A.** His second uprising began after the Company annexed Wayanad, his traditional territory, and he waged guerrilla war from its forests. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** He earned the epithet "Kerala Simham," the Lion of Kerala, for his resistance across both the 1793-97 and 1800-05 uprisings. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** He was killed on 30 November 1805 at Mavila Thodu, a stream near Pulpally on the Kerala-Karnataka border. ↑ Q4
5. **D.** At Periya Pass in 1797 the Raja's men hid in stockades on both sides and struck the Company force as it entered. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** The Company called its wars with Pazhassi Raja the Cotiote War. Cotiote comes from the English form of Kottayam. ↑ Q6
7. **D.** Arthur Wellesley was appointed commandant for Mysore, Canara and Malabar. He spent years fighting the Raja's guerrilla war. ↑ Q7
8. **A.** Kurichiya bowmen fought for Pazhassi Raja. Nairs, Thiyyas and other groups also joined his forces. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

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

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