

Temple and Artisan Communities in Medieval Kerala

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Abstract

The artisan communities greatly influenced the village life and cultural history of medieval Kerala. With the formation of village communities in medieval Kerala, there emerged a certain occupational groups of artisans. These occupational groups were commonly known as Kammalan or Vishwakarma. The resource parameter, trade route or trade centers and consumption communities were the basis for the distribution pattern of the artisan communities. In the initial stage the artisans generally settled around the resource regions. But later they began to settle around the consumption communities because of the accumulation of resources with them. The emergence of temple as a consumption community during the medieval period paved the way for proliferation of artisan communities. They began to provide undeniable services to the society. During the social formation temple played an important role and also facilitated various kinds of labour requirement and it further led to the concentration of artisans centered on the temple.

Key words: Artisans, Consumption Community, Resource Region.

Introduction

Medieval Kerala society presents the picture of a very complex internal dynamism. This society was a complex departure from the society preceded. It has been arguing that the notable characteristic of medieval society was the transition from tribal society to an agrarian society based on feudal dependency relations. The seminal aspect of the period was its segmentation and had reflections in every domains of life. In medieval Kerala, *jati* system constituted an important form of social system. Historians are of the opinion that temples constituted the nucleus of caste identities in the *Perumal* period and they got wide acceptance and importance in the post *Perumal* period. The caste system in Kerala had an intricate connection with the specialization of profession. The development of the hereditary specialists in profession led to the emergence of artisan community in Kerala. The development of society with the formation of village communities in Medieval Kerala, led to the emergence of certain occupational groups such as metal workers, wood workers, stone workers etc. The agricultural implements made of household utensils, leather goods, wood and iron, jewelers etc., were the products manufactured by various group of artisans. The medieval records referred them as *Kammalas*, *Ainkudi Kammalas*, *Pathinettunattar*, *PathinenVishayathar*, and so on.¹ The emergence of artisans was perhaps an outcome of social formation. The growth of agriculture, emergence of temple as a consumption community triggered the formation and proliferation of artisan communities in Kerala. Thus, the development of temples boosted the development of artisan communities. The artisan communities mainly settled in the resource region in the initial phase and as a result of the spread and development of temples, they began to settle around them. In this epoch the present study is an attempt to analyze how the development of temples results in the proliferation of artisan communities in medieval Kerala.

Development of Temple and Artisans

The emergence of temple as a consumption community during the medieval period paved the way for proliferation of artisan communities in medieval Kerala. It is generally observed that the temple during the medieval period possessed various right and privileges played an important role in all aspect of the society. As mentioned elsewhere, the majority of land assets of the society were owned by the temples.ⁱⁱ It further results the formation of a temple to become the hub of political disposition, economic center, and venue of festivals etc. An enquiry into the origin of the temples in Kerala pointing towards the fact that it was the Buddhist, whose started to the construction of the *Viharas* and set up portraits of Buddha. Meanwhile the Buddhists did not recognize any individual God or for the matter of that any God by any means. Be that as it may, in the ascent of Mahayana school of Buddhism, ceremonies, customs, and picture adore came into presence. The neighborhood individuals attempted to mirror a few practices from Buddhism and began worshipping God and later saw the foundation of the *Shethrams*.ⁱⁱⁱ Both the decline of Buddhism and the beginning of temples society, a few Buddhist *Viharas* were converted into temples. For example, the temple at Kiliroor Sasthamkotta and Nagarcoil Temple were basically Buddhist *Viharas* before the emergence of said temples.

The artisan communities were centered on the resource region in the beginning. But in the later stage the settlement sites of the communities moved towards the temple regions. To understand such transformation in the settlement sites it is necessary to go through the socio-political conditions prevalent during this period. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai opined that, the emergence and growth of temples witnessed several changes in the society which took place during the 9th century A. D.^{iv} Contrary to this view M.G.S Narayanan in his note based on the *Keralolpathi* concepts argues that the emergence of temple had been seen from the Post-Sangam period onwards.^v Based on the analysis of various scholars on the Brahmin settlement in Kerala portraits that Brahmin settlements of Kerala took shape between the closing years of Sangam age and the 7th century A. D.^{vi} Thus the Brahmin centered society existed before the second *Chera* empire itself.

The integration of landed households into corporate settlements and the formation of larger agrarian society in Kerala corresponded to the emergence of temple.^{vii} At the same time another point of view is also prevalent in this context. The view states that, the spread of Brahmin settlements resulted agrarian expansion and it further led to the formation of structured temples in Kerala.^{viii} Brahmin settlements are generally found in river valleys and made particularly extended in the more fertile regions together with the land grants and which emerge by the revival of the *Cheras* in Kerala, indicates and perhaps accounts for the rapid increase in the agricultural production.^{ix}

There are a number of inscriptions supporting the arrangement that the political support paved the way for spreading Brahmin settlements and development of temples in Kerala is an indispensable fact. For example, Kollurmadam Copper Plate written as directed by the ruler of Venadu Vallabham Kotha clearly states the temple expenses and maintenance of a Brahmin settlement around the Kollurmadam temple which can be assumed to have been occupied by twenty three families.^x Similar references also made in the Kilimanoor copper plate. Land grants to temple were very common in this period. Kotha Kerala Varman of Venadu granted land to the Nanjinad Sujeendram temple for the acquaintance of day to day affairs of the temple.^{xi} Such similar instances can also be noticed while analyzing the origin of temples at Travancore. From the above observations it can be assumed that the

political as well as the administrative support towards the development and establishment of temples were predominant during the medieval period. Besides the rulers, the major land holders during the time also granted land to the temples for the well maintenance of temples without any profit.^{xii} There were different examinations on the verifying variables of the advancement of temples in the general public. One of the prevalent perspectives as takes after, the activity of force in the specific socio-political arrangement was accomplished essentially through the times of image of the Aramic Hindu religion, which was proliferated through the forceful Bhakti development and its institutional articulation of temple.^{xiii}

The development of temple also made progressive changes and development in the Brahmin settlements. For example, eight Brahmin settlements were settled in Thiruvalla temple.^{xiv} It is observed that more than thirty two Brahmin settlements or *Agraharams* were attached with major temples in the region. In such a way it can be assumed that the development of temple also resulted in the development of subsidiary settlements in the nearby villages. Such labour groups were not merely a concentration of a specific work done. But they include almost all specified groups of employer who performed various kinds of jobs which is necessary to the smooth functioning of the society.^{xv} The south Indian inscriptions clearly depict the presence of artisan communities even in the *Agraharas*. In short the development of Brahmin settlement and *Agraharas* naturally results the development of artisan communities as well.

Artisan communities gave predominant assistance in the smooth functioning of the day to day affairs of the temple. Hence the development of the temple naturally result the spread of artisan settlements in the region. Before the formation of temples in the society the artisan communities like, *Asari, Kollan, Thattan, Vaniyar, Chaliyar etc.*, were settled outside the villages. The medieval inscriptional references like *Kollarcheri, Vaniyacheri etc.*, were further substantive to the argument.^{xvi} The settlement outside the village was termed as ‘*Kudi*’. Hence the term ‘*Kudi*’ denoted to the artisan settlement which was on outside of the village. The references in the medieval records like *Kollakudi, Thattankudi, Moosarikudi* and so on will supplement the argument. Since the artisan communities had very minimal role after the completion of temple construction, they stayed outside the temples. This would be the reason to exclude the artisan communities from the temple premises.

Meanwhile, drastic changes were taken place between the artisan communities and the temples. The temples became the consuming community of the artisans. It led to the shifting of artisans from the outside village to the center of village. A few references states that the settlement sites of artisans were allotted and settled within the temple premises to satisfy the requirements of the temple society. Kollurmadam Copper Plate can be considered as the supplementary evidence for the argument.^{xvii} The references such as *Kalavaniya Viruthi, Karuva Viruthi etc.*, strengthen the argument that the land grants to the artisan communities were not rare during the period.^{xviii} The vital role of the artisans in the temple affairs would be the reason for such land grants.

Several rights and privileges were accorded to the artisan communities in order to maximize their services. Such references can be found in the South Indian inscriptions. For example, the so called upper caste Brahmanical practice of wearing *Pooool* was also given to the artisan communities as regards to the sacrifices like *Rajasreya Chathur Mangalyam*, which was only reserved for Brahmins before. Such rights and privileges were given to the artisan communities of south India, but the communities in medieval Kerala did not enjoy such privileges. The ritual role of artisan in the temples and *Kavus* in Kerala can be assessed

in this context. These privileges later became a part of tradition of the community. *Pisharikavu* of *Kurumbranadu* in Malabar still follows such traditional practices. In the seven days festival 6th day during the time of procession the *Kollan* and *Thattan* of artisan community was given the right to hold the deity of the temple. Such rights were given to the *Thattan* and *Kollan* communities' in respect of the making of silver umbrella of deity and the making iron implements to the temples respectively.^{xxix} In place of these rights the right to hold the sword of the deity was given to the *Kollan* community.

In respect of the services rendered by the artisan communities few titles like *Perum*, *Acharya*, *Achari* etc., was given by the temples as well as the *Naduvazhies*. For instance the Sujeendram inscription clearly mentioned that in honor of the construction of the Sujeendram temple, *Padmanabhachari*, the leader of artisan of temple construction, was given the title of '*Pathinettu Nattar Kula Manikyam*' by the Kotha Kerala Varman in 1148.^{xxx} Nampelli Copper Plate of Sri Vallabhan Kotha clearly states the granting of title deeds to a *Moosari* of artisan community.^{xxxi} From the above mentioned references it can be observed that irrespective of the caste and class differences the artisan communities were given certain rights and privileges either by the ruler or by the temple itself. It was the necessity of the dominant groups to maintain the artisan communities within the society. By incorporating the artisan communities in the rituals, it was a strategy to hold the communities within the society.

The agrarian based temple society became the center of socio-economic and cultural center in the later years. Temples were not only a center of spiritual needs but also resource redistribution. It finally results the temples to become a largest consumer of goods and services. In this context an attempt is made to trace the services of artisan rendered by the temples during the period under study. Every particular caste in the artisan communities invariably formed as part of the temple centered society.^{xxii} In south India the *Chera*, *Chola*, *Pandya*, *Hoisala* and *Chalukya* period ranging from 8th to 13th century witnessed a rapid growth in the construction and development of temples.

There were repeated references in the Thiruvalla copper plates about *Asari*, *Moosari*, *Kallasari* and so on. Such references show the important role performed by these specific groups.^{xxiii} Specific attention was also given to the architectural design and hence, there was a need of specialized artisan in each section. They were given proper recognition in the form of title endeavors. All the necessities of temple were satisfied within the temple society itself due to the incorporation of the communities with the temple directly within the adjacent area. Each temple maintained a minimum number of professional groups as well as non-professional groups to the smooth functioning of the day to day affairs of temple. From the analysis of the available inscriptions, it can be observed that every agricultural economy had the involvement and present of artisan communities. In the initial stage every sub-caste in the artisan communities was not included in the temple oriented society as inscribed in the Thirunelly Copper Plate.^{xxiv}

But the same time the presence of carpenters in every temple were noticeable. Because in the final stage of every temple construction, wooden structures were unavoidable thing, hence there was in need of carpenters.^{xxv} When the architectures shifted from wood structure to stone structures, there was an anticipation of *Kallasari* to the temple construction.^{xxvi} Every temple maintained a minimum number of skilled professionals for the development of the temple architecture. Likewise, there were eighteen Tamil temples maintained such professionals and they were termed as '*Pathinettu Nattukar*'.^{xxvii}

Kallasaris were the another artisanal group associated with the temple construction in the medieval Kerala. They constructed pillars, images, ornaments, arches etc., in association with the temple construction. A Few inscriptions denoted them as *Sthapthi* and a few inscribed as *Shilpi* or Sculptor. One of the important inscriptions in south India describes the *Sthapthi* as *Vastutatvajna*, which means one who has the knowledge of science of architecture.^{xxviii} *Thattan* and *Chembotti* caste of artisan communities were emerged in the temple construction for using metals like bronze, copper, bras etc. When the temple became the centre of power relations in the society naturally became the store home of gold, silver and precious jewels etc.

The temple administrators maintained perpetual lamp and considered it as the light of the society. The lamps were made out of stones and the work group assigned to construct such lamps was always anticipated to the temples.^{xxix} It is generally observed that copper was imported to Kerala as part of trade.^{xxx} It is observed that the temples depended the artisan communities for day to day affairs as well as the demands of the stipulated days such as festivals, feasts etc.,^{xxxi} The inscriptional evidences provide much light on this regard. The evidences show that during the festive occasion at Thiruvalla temple made use of hundreds of clay pottery as part of feast ceremonies, such instances point towards the artisan communities in the temple festivals.^{xxxii} Potteries were extensively used for the daily routines of the temple.

The medieval Kerala temple also served as the record office. The temples maintained the annual records and the other records in the form of copper plates. It further necessitated the demand of labour in regard to the artisan communities. These special groups were termed as temple craft man. A Sujeendram Inscription of 1145 of Nanjinadu explains the details of the person inscribed the documents and mentioned his name as Soman Selvan.^{xxxiii} Similar examples can also found in the Thiruvalla inscription and in the Thirunelly copper plate. The Thirunelly copper plate states the names of the artisan as *Kurumbranad Perum Thattan*.^{xxxiv} From these records it can be observed that for maintaining such records in the temples depended on the work force of the artisan communities were depended. Each community had their own work assignment. There was no scope for the intermingling of the specific work.

Generally artisan communities do not interfere with the job of others within the communities. The Thirunelly copper plate shed much light on the work specialization in this context. In the development of hereditary profession led to the emergence of occupational groups such as *Assari*, *Kollan*, *Chembotti* and so on. Based on the evidences it can be observed that the construction of structured temples enhanced the profession or artisan communities in Kerala.^{xxxv} To same extent the temple oriented society was a self-sufficient one. This tendency was controlled and managed by the temple itself. There was lack of the use money as a medium to render the services of the artisan communities as well as the rest of the people.^{xxxvi} The use of a medium was supplemented by the use of land grant. The use of money is referred as a symbol of developed economy. The concept of self-sufficiency in the period boosted the development of artisan communities in medieval Kerala.

Conclusion

In the caste oriented medieval Kerala society the artisans were branded as *Sudra* professionals. But the so called upper class society gave them some privileges in relation to the production irrespective of the caste and class variations. A few number of titles like *Perum*, *Acharya*, *Achari* etc., were bestowed upon them by the temples and the *Naduvazhies*.

The main intention of the dominant class was to hold the communities within the society. The artisans received land grants like *Jeevitham* and *Viruthi* mainly from the temples for their services. These grants were mainly to ensure their services in a particular geological area. The artisans always show loyalty to the donor of the land.

The temple oriented society was developed in medieval Kerala as a result of the rights and privileges of the temple on land affairs. In the initial stage the artisans generally settled around the resource regions. But later they began to settle around the temple because the temples became the center for the redistribution of resources apart from their spiritual activities. The temple depended on the artisans mainly to fulfill their day today requirements and in association with festivals, feasts etc. Artisans helped to meet various kinds of labour requirements of the temples. Later an indispensable relationship began to develop between these two communities. In short, the emergence of temple as a consumption community during the medieval period paved the way for proliferation of artisan communities in medieval Kerala.

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