



Negotiating Power Through Ritual - A Historical Study Of Koodalmanikya Shethra Sanketham

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Abstract

Temples serve as enduring markers of Kerala's rich spiritual traditions and cultural heritage. The Koodalmanikyam Temple situated in central Kerala, holds a significant and unique place within the traditional *sanketham* system. The paper titled *Rituals and Power Practices in Koodalmanikyam Temple - A Historical Study* examines the close relationship between ritual practices and power structures in the temple, highlighting how ritual authority shaped governance, social hierarchy, and institutional control in pre-colonial Kerala. The study also traces the transformations in ritual power brought about by colonial intervention and modern administrative reforms, which gradually redefined the temple's traditional autonomy. By viewing ritual as a historically grounded social practice, the paper underlines the political significance of temple rituals in shaping local power relations.

The Sankethams existed in many parts of Kerala in medieval times. K.P. Padhmanabha Menon has described the *sanketham* as a defined territory over which no king has any power to wield temporal authority within the boundaries of the *sanketham* of a *devaswom*. According to him they were independent republics free from the control of kings from outside¹. The king had only the position of protector. And even to this post of the protector any king could be selected, whether or not he is the actual ruler of the territory in which the *Sanketham* is located. The temples developed into powerful states during the medieval period had their own territorial jurisdiction known as *sanketams*². The *Sanketam* attached to the temple developed and became powerful in the 11th and 12th centuries, and its authority weakened due to the invasion of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan and later on with the establishment of British power in Kerala. Two different types of *Sanketams* namely *Kshetra sanketam* and *Grama Sanketam* are said to have existed. The *Grama sanketam* was a *sanketam* of one of 32 settlements, while the *kshetra sanketam* was that of fresh settlements around the temple. However there was no difference between the two³. Each important temple had within its jurisdiction a well defined territory called *sanketam* managed by the *Uralar*. The *sanketam* was almost a state within the state with its own organs of government and the ruling sovereigns had no effective control over them. Some of the temples were even sovereign states with a well defined territory of their own *Sanketams*⁴. They also provided the rulers with a safe place or sanctuary for asylum during times of war and internal disorder. In view of the importance of temples the rulers of the age sought to acquire *melkoima* rights over temples situated in territories over which they had no political

jurisdiction. The Rajas often resorted to intrigues and counter intrigues in their attempts to obtain melkoima rights over such temples situated outside their political domains. The temple of Peruvanam, Koodalmanikyam, Vadakkumnathan, Annamanada are few temples truly reflect this political encounter.

The Sree Sangameswara Temple in Irinjalakuda, which flourished under the patronage of the later monarchs who governed the realm from their capital at Mahodayapuram, occupies a pre eminent position among the ancient and storied temples of Kerala⁵. Irinjalakuda itself is a historical territory that asserts a heritage and culture as venerable as the Keralaolpathi. Historical chronicles assert that the Irinjalakuda gramam was one among the sixty-four original settlements established by Parasurama in Kerala that possessed profound significance. Situated at the geographic center, Irinjalakuda maintained hegemony over the villages located between the Karuvannur River and the Varappuzha River among these sixty-four settlements. This historical reality serves as evidence that the township is fundamentally powered by the vitalizing energies of an archaic tradition. During the era of Brahmin ascendancy, when the Namboothiris partitioned Kerala into desams to institute administrative hegemony and established a desakkootam, the Irinjalakuda Kootam was specifically cited among the regional councils thus formed⁶.

Kavus (sacred groves) were there in the beginning, and these sacred groves were not merely sanctuaries for the veneration of local deities; but they also functioned as community centers addressing the grievances and petitions of the local populace. Subsequently, Brahmanical influence grew, formalized temples began to emerge, enshrining deities such as Shiva, Vishnu, and Shakti. Simultaneously, Jaina-Buddhist *Viharas* (monasteries) were also established. Following this period, the Sanketams or autonomous temple territories arose, representing the sophisticated evolution of the ancient tharakkootams and Jaina-Buddhist Viharas. The grama-kshetra sabhas (village-temple councils) transitioned into sanketams, and it was through these autonomous territories that the Brahmins consolidated absolute power⁷. In due course the majority of Kerala's temples evolved into Grama-Kshethra.

Koodalmanikkam temple was richly endowed, and owns immovable property in the States of Cochin and Travancore and also in Malabar in British India. Being in an important Brahmin settlement and one among the four Talis, Irinjalakuda enjoyed a higher position and it was strengthened by Koodalmanikyam temple. The Irinjalakuda Grama is one of the foremost among the four premier Gramas of Kerala. This Grama is also known by the name of Sangama Grama", this being but the Samskritised form of the former. The Grandhavaris give a list of information about Irinjalakuda temple, its prosperity and popularity, its tradition and position as one of the important temples in Kerala. The administration of temple was performed by both Brahmins and non-Brahmins. The Uralars were the Brahmin functionaries. Pothuval and Varier were the two important functional categories in the non-Brahmin order. The Thachudaya Kaimal was a non Brahmin office associated with koodalmanikyam temple. Despite the hegemony of Brahmin in the temples, we have stray incidents where the non-Brahmin exercised managerial control both in external and internal affairs of the temple. The earliest reference about the installation of Kaimal found in the agreement of 517 between the Uralars and Raja of Onattukara. Accordingly Kaimal was appointed for the supervision of the construction of sree-kovil⁸.

The immediate management of the temple is in the hands of an official known as the Thachudaya Kaimal, who is responsible for the due performance of the ceremonies in the Pagoda, and for the proper administration of the temple property. A body of persons known as the Yogam, composed of His Highness the Rajah of Cochin, and the representatives of 42 Nambudri families, is in a way connected with the temple. The connection between the Yogam and the temple is the subject of dispute between the Thachudaya Kaimal and the members of the Yogam. While the Kaimal claims to be the absolute owner of the Pagoda and its endowments accountable for his acts to no one, the Yogam asserts that he is their appointee, and, as manager of the temple property, accountable to them for the due discharge of his duties, and the proper administration of the trust property⁹. Those matters have been, and are the subject of litigation both in the Cochin and British Courts. In other words, the Yogam claim to be the trustees of this Pagoda, and allege, that the Thachudaya Kaimal is simply their agent carrying out their orders. The right

of the Yogam is described in the letter of the Resident to the Chief Secretary of the Madras Government, dated 20th May 1909, as being that of proprietor of the temple, or what according to him means the same thing, of Urallar. They could not be proprietors of an institution, dedicated to the public, in any other sense than as trustees or Urallars.

The installation ceremony of the Thachudaya Kaimal the officer in charge of the administration of Koodalmanikyam temple at Irinjalakuda has been called Jatakavarodham. The appointment of the Kaimal was not a mere secular act, but a religious function performed with pomp and ceremony. The avardham consisted of several processes. Avaradham literally means to install or to ordain a person to a position. This system existed in Kerala from the olden times onwards mainly conducted on the installation of chiefs, kings, special ruling officials, feudal families and persons in charge of temple administration. The ceremony is known in different names according to different positions and regions. The avardham of royals are commonly called as Ariyittuvazhcha or Kireedadharanam. The avardham of Kavalappara Moopil Nayar called as Tandettam. And Koodalmanikyam temple had Thachudaya Kaimal avardham, it was called as Jathakavarodham and this was conducted by the Azhvancheri Thamprakkal. The avardham of Thachudaya Kaimal as the 'Adhikari' of Koodal Manikyam Temple of Irinjalakuda was a political ritual. Though the temple is situated in erstwhile Kochi State, the Raja of erstwhile Travancore State nominated the Thachudaya Kaimal. One among the nairs was selected as Kaimal. After 'avardham' he will get a higher status and position over and above the Brahmins. The Namboothiris (Kerala Brahmins) used to hold umbrella for the Kaimal. Only one wooden plank was provided for the Namboothiris whereas two were required for the Kaimal to sit.

The Koodalmanikyam temple, Irinjalakuda has been unique in respect of its management because till recently it was vested in Thachudaya Kaimal, a Nair sanyasi, appointed by the ruler of Travancore on the request of Cochin in whose territory it was situated¹⁰. The ceremonies and celebration connected with the accession of each king to power was determined by his position in the hierarchy of power. The Namboothiri Brahmins had a very important part to play in the installation ceremonies, whether it was that of the king or other chieftains.

The office of the Thachudaya Kaimal became a source for long standing conflict between the kingdoms of Travancore and Cochin. When the treaty of 1765 AD was signed between Travancore and Cochin the managerial rights over the temple came in to the hands of Travancore. A part from the prestige and financial control, the right for installation of Kaimal gave some special significance for Travancore. Treaty obligations made Cochin Darbar totally helpless, and state had to remain a silent spectator to the powers of Travancore through a nominee in a prestigious temple located in her soil. It was a unique and unusual event in the region's religious history for Śudra to be ceremoniously promoted to the rank of supreme religious authority and to assume control of a temple that was previously run by Brahmin trustees. The consecrated carpenter became converted into a consecrated manager which completely changed his function from supervising temple construction into managing temple funds. From a secular point he owed his position partly to the initiative taken by the Yogam and chiefly to his selection by the Travancore chief. The influence of Thachudaya Kaimal Sthanam is evident from the conflict between the Travancore and Cochin. The temple lost many of their previous authorities with the changing scenario.

It was during the administrative period of last Thachudaya Kaimal that the Kerala Land Reforms Act came into force. As a result, the land of Sree Koodal Manikyam, which was spread across the Thrissur, Ernakulam, and Palakkad districts, passed into the hands of the occupants. Consequently, the Devaswom's income significantly decreased, making it difficult even to meet daily expenses.¹¹ This financial crisis naturally created an administrative crisis for the Devaswom. A few employees were laid off from the Devaswom. The employees protested this decision and even resorted to strikes. The administrative crisis of the Devaswom came to the notice of the government, and the Koodal Manikyam Devaswom Act was formed in 1971 to resolve it. As per the Koodal Manikyam Devaswom Act of 1971, the Government of Kerala vested the administration of the Koodal Manikyam Devaswom in a Managing Committee. The Sree

Koodal Manikyam Devaswom Managing Committee was formed. The Sree Thachudaya Kaimal was the first Chairman of the Koodal Manikyam Devaswom Managing Committee. However, the Koodal Manikyam Devaswom Act of 1971 was amended in 1976, according to which the Thrissur District Collector became the Chairman of the Managing Committee, and the Thachudaya Kaimal was made a member of the Managing Committee. After the formation of the Kerala state the government issued several Ordinances which curtailed several powers of the temple. The Koodalmanikyam Devaswom Act of 1976 made drastic changes in the administration of Koodalmanikyom. There appointed a committee with District collector of Thrissur as its Chairman¹². The temple is now under the Cochin Devaswom Board and and Thrissur District Collector is the administraton.

The office of the Thachudaya Kaimal, intrinsically linked to the Koodal Manikyam Temple, has occupied a pivotal role in the socio-political and spiritual history of Kerala. The temples of ancient Kerala served as the primary loci of social control, both in administrative and economic terms. Thachudaya Kaimal persisted as the spiritual patron and social overseer of the temple administration, exercising critical authority in all matters pertaining to temple lands, taxation, customs, and liturgical festivals. The nature of this authority, and the subsequent shifts within it, mirror the broader transformations and renaissance within Kerala society. This social evolution naturally impacted the supremacy of the temples and their associated offices. With the advent of constitutional reforms, the establishment of Devaswom Boards, and increased public participation, the administrative power of the Thachudaya Kaimal diminished; nevertheless, the spiritual and traditional significance of the position endures.

¹ K.P.Padmanabha Menon Kochi Rajya Charitran Vol 1, Mathruboomi Books, Chapter IX

² Rajan Gurukkal, The Kerala Temple and the Early Medieval Agrarian System, Vallathol Vidhyapeetham, Shugapuram, 1992, p.70

³ M.G.S Narayan, Perumals of Kerala Cosmo Books, Thrissur, 1996, p.144

⁴ K V Krishna Ayyar , A Short History of Kerala, PAI & Company, Ernakulam.p. 322

⁵ Dr. K.K.N. Kurup, Sree Koodalmanikyam Kshetram, Puravrithacharithram, Sree Koodalmanikyam Devaswom, 2011, p. 8

⁶ Dr. C.R. Rajagopalan, Nattucharithram, DC Books, Kottayam, 2008, p. 68.

⁷ P. Bhaskaranunni, Pathonpatham Noottandile Keralam, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2000, p. 807.

⁸ K. P.Padmanabha Menon, History of Kerala. Vol. IV, New Delhi, 1937, p 90.

⁹ Papers relating to the sthanam of Thachudaya Kaimal, p.20, Regional Archives, Ernakulam

¹⁰ Prof.A Sreedhara Menon Cultural Heritage of Kerala, DC Books ,Kottayam P.46

¹¹ Paykkattu Manakkal Parameswaran namboodirippadu, Sree Kootalmankyam Charithram, Brothers, Pullur, 1963, p.45

¹² The Koodalmanikyam Devaswam Act of 1976, Legislative Acts Vol. III, Regional Archives ,Ernakulam