

Brahmin Settlements and The Land Tenure System of Kerala

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Abstract

Land tenure system of Kerala explicitly associated with the feudalism in the medieval period. Land became the precious form of wealth and it determined the social status of the people. After the establishment of the Brahmin settlements, social hierarchy was formed in the state. With the help of their temple oriented culture, the Brahmins subjugated all social institutions of Kerala. In that circumstance, temples played an important role to the social formations of Kerala. The temple was synonymous with the Brahmin settlement and vice-versa. Temples developed as the hub around which activities of production and distribution revolved. Therefore the Brahmin settlements in Kerala are that they were essentially temple-centered. The structured temples are mostly found after the Brahmin settlements in Kerala. The study “Brahmin settlements and the land tenure system of Kerala” mainly

focused on the Brahmin migration in Kerala and its repercussions on the society. It also aimed to understand various land tenure systems in Kerala during the medieval period.

Key words

Brahmin settlements

Land tenure System

Uralar

Karalar

Rekshabhogam

Cherical

pothuval

In the Brahminical claim, Parasurama created the land Kerala and donated it to the Nambuthiri Brahmins. The Brahminical elements with the Parasurama tradition seems to be the starting point of the distinctiveness of Kerala and its departure from the rest of *Tamilakam*. In the case of the South, it is the strip of land from Gokarna to Kanyakumari which is identified as the land retrieved by Parasurama.

The conservative scholars connected the Aryan settlements of Kerala with the Parasurama tradition. In this theory, Parasurama, the sixth incarnation of God Vishnu, threw his axe and reclaimed the land from the sea. The new reclaimed land was known in common parlance as *Parasuramakhatram* or the land of Parasurama. For the habitation of the new reclaimed land, Parasurama brought the Nambuthiri Brahmins from the North and gave the 'new land' as a gift to them.¹ The new land was divided into four separate divisions such as:

- (1) The Tulu Khandom, from Gokarnam to Perumpula river
- (2) Kerala Khandom, from Perumpula to Putupattanam
- (3) The Mushika Khandom, from Puthupattanam to Kannetti
- (4) The Kuvala or Kuvu Khandom, from Kannetti to Cape Comorin.²

However, it is difficult to fix a definite period of the Brahmin settlements on the basis of the Parasurama tradition, because the Parasurama tradition does not have any historicity. The Namboothiri Brahmins flourished as an organized community in Kerala during the 8th century A.D. During the period of the Pallavas, Melathol Agnihotri, the great Karmavadin lived in Kerala.³ Sankaranarayana, the famous astronomer, Tholan, the author of Attaprakarams and Karmadipika, Sakhibhadran, the author of ancient Sanskrit drama Acharyachoodamony and Sankaracharya (A.D 789-820 A.D) too had

lived in the same period.⁴ The temple inscriptions of Kerala from the 9th century A.D onwards reveal that the temple-centered Brahmin settlements became well-established and it gained control over the whole fertile traits of Kerala during the 8th century A.D.

The Brahmin settlements were founded in Kerala well before the establishment of the Chera Kingdom of Mahodayapuram. The Brahmins in Kerala are said to have settled originally in thirty-two villages. But they spread, establishing fresh settlements by fusing together elements of established ones and amalgamating two or more settlements to form bigger ones. The Namboothiri Brahmins established 64 settlements, of which 32 belonged to the Tulu region and 32 settlements in Kerala, forming one unit in the beginning.⁵ According to the traditional chronicle, following are the 32 Brahmin settlements in Kerala, Perumpula or Chandragiri and Kanyakumari.⁶

(a) Between River Perumpula and River Karumanpula

- (i) Payyannur, (ii) Perumcellur, (iii) Karikkadu, (iv) Isanamangalam,
- (v) Alattur, (vi) Karantala, (vii) Trissivaperur, (viii) Perumanam, (ix) Panniyur, (x) Cokriam.

(b) Between River Karumanpual and River Curni

(i) Paravur, (ii) Airanikulam, (iii) Mulikkulam, (iv) Irinnalakkuda, (v) Adavur, (vi) Cenganatu, (vii) Uliyannur, (viii) Kalutanatu, (ix) Kulayur, (x) Ilibhyam, (xi) Camunda, (xii) Avattiputtur.

(c) Between River Curni and Kanyakumari

(i) Kidangur, (ii) Kadurmaruku, (iii) Kumaranallur, (iv) Kaviyur, (v) Errumanur, (vi) Niramannu, (vii) Venmani, (viii) Aranmula, (ix) Cengannur, (x) Tiruvalla.⁷

The important fact about the Brahmin settlements in Kerala is that they were essentially temple-centered. The temple was synonymous with the Brahmin settlement and vice-versa.⁸ The temple developed as the hub around which activities of production and distribution revolved.⁹ Most of the inscriptions of the Cheras of Mahodayapuram pertain to the Brahmin settlements. They record transactions of temple-centered Brahmin settlements related to the organization and administration of the settlement.¹⁰ Each of the settlement was organized around a temple central to it, known as the *gramaksetra*. Members of each of these *gramas* cherish that the deity consecrated in their *gramaksetra* is their patron deity. So, the identification of the village or *grama* has to start from the identification of the *gramaksetra* or “village temple”. In fact, the term ‘village’ does not really translate the idea of a *grama*, which was a community organized around the temple, without reference to

territorial notions.¹¹ Therefore large number of inscriptions from the 9th century onwards recorded the transactions of the temple-centered Brahmin settlements in Kerala.

The rise of temples and the Brahmin settlements were inter-related, particularly the creation of vast corporations. There were number of inscriptions regarding the temple-centered Brahmin settlements.¹² Temples played a decisive role in the socio-economic and religious life Kerala. They served as an agency for easier and more efficient extraction of surplus from the peasants in the agrarian economy. It also contributed to the extension of agriculture in the tribal areas and the consolidation of landlord domination. In the course of such extension, the temple accelerated the process of the disintegration of tribal society and its reorganization as a caste society. The emergence of numerous agrarian settlements which was managed by the temple based corporations of the land holders and the growth of many warrior households as the seats of the lineage of chiefs etc. were the important features.¹³

In the newly formed caste society, the temple served as an integrating factor linking the high and the low in its service. It paved way for the Brahmin-supported monarchies in South India. In this process, the ideology of *varnasrama dharma* strengthened its grip over the society. In course of time, the temple, a landed magnate in the early

stage, developed into a storehouse of gold, silver and precious jewels. It produced the need for exclusiveness and protection, leading eventually to the development of the temple in to fortress-like proportions with special circles of streets, bazaar. Besides, the temple acted as the agent for developing, consolidating, transmitting and conserving the legacy of culture.¹⁴

Temples were the focal point of education, culture and economic activities of the people. Therefore, the temples had a unique place in the socio-religious life of the people.¹⁵ The temples also acted as the core of the village life in Travancore.¹⁶ Large numbers of temples in South India were constructed during the period of agrarian expansion through *brahmadeyas*. In fact, temples acted as the institutional means of co-ordination of landed households and the corporate body.¹⁷ They became the major agrarian centers of South India.

Different kinds of income were generated in temple like *rakshabhogam*, the dues exacted for the protection it offered to the local people, *dhanam* or fine imposed on the defaulters and *prayacittam* or remorse it received from the guilty.¹⁸ Besides this revenue, various endowments, especially those in the form of livestock, land and gold, were owned by the temples. The land endowments of the temple included crown land, held by the ruling aristocracy known as *cerikal*, land owned by the Brahmins known as *brahmasvam*, land occupied by

the merchants and the leases *karanmai* held by the temple functionaries.¹⁹ Most of the land was endowed to the temple permanently and with absolute rights.²⁰ The copper plate records of the Pallavas and the Pandyas in the 7th and 8th century A.D provide information on the various rights on land and concomitantly the position of different sections in society depending upon the nature of right that one enjoyed on a particular piece of land.

Most of the copper plates belonging to the Pallava period have recorded grant of lands to the Brahmins,²¹ indicating the beginning of the structured relationship in the matter of land rights. In the Pyramidal hierarchy, the Perumal or the King and his land *cerikal* was at the top, in which there were *karalar* or tenants and the *kudiyalar* or the occupants. Below the *karalar*, there were labourers, who were attached into the land known as *adiyalar*. A portion of *cerikal* land may have been granted as *viruthi* or service tenure to the religious and secular functionaries. But the pattern of *karalar* - *kudiyalar* - *adiyalar* hierarchy remained the same in such cases also.²² There was another tier, viz., significant group of intermediaries in the Brahmin settlements owing right over land as either *brahmaswam* or Brahmin property and *devaswam* property or temple's property and marginally the trading groups in the *nagarams*.²³

The properties under the temple management continued as a source of income but without corresponding expenditure, the trustees

began to be considered as the real owners of it. The Chera rulers allowed the village assemblies and temple committees, which were rural agrarian corporations in nature, to enjoy political autonomy and take part in the local administration of the urban guilds and corporations. The temple property was managed by a council known as ‘*uralars*’ in which almost all of them were Brahmins.²⁴ The term *uralar* is usually employed in the plural since it was a joint proprietorship in the villages. The *uralar* were also known as ‘*nattar*’, *sabhaiyar* or *sabha*, ‘*taliyar*’ or *tali* and Srivaisnavar etc. They were the counter parts of *mahattara*, *mahajana* and *perumakkal* as they were otherwise known in different parts of South India.²⁵

The temple had specifically constituted committees or departments called ‘*variyaams*’ to look after the temple matters. Several inscriptions refer to various committees like the committees of irrigation tanks known as *erivariyam* agrarian fields or *kalani-variyaam* and garden land or *totta variyam*.²⁶ They also acted as the accountant and had the charge of the temple revenue. In the contemporary Tamil inscriptions it has been described that *variyaam* performed certain administrative duties of the state. The office of the *pothuval* was the general secretary of the temple administration. The terms ‘*akapothuval*’ and ‘*purupothuval*’ were mentioned in the inscriptions of the medieval period. The *akapothuval* managed the internal affairs of the temple such as the day-

to-day offerings, rituals and festivals etc. whereas the *purapothuval* managed the external affairs of the temple including the land and other properties.²⁷ Certain rules were observed regarding the proceedings and functions of the temple committees. The most referred code is the *mulikkalam kacham* and the functions of these bodies were free fold.

Land was the most precious form of wealth and was considered as the symbol of power and status in the society. The Brahmins were the highest landowners and major share of the cultivable land was under the control of the Brahmins in the form of *brahmasvam* and *devasvam*. The evolution of Brahmin landlordism in Kerala is based on three major premises:

- 1) the elective, democratic, character of the *sabha* or the *uralar* which functioned within a larger unit of the *ur*, *urar* or *urkuttam*,
- 2) the existence of a still larger body known as the *nattuluttam* identified with the 'Hundred organizations' and its superordinate authority over both the *urkuttam* and the *sabha* of the *uralar* within it, and,
- 3) the changes in the character and organization of these bodies brought about by the so called 'Hundred Years War' and the resultant domination of the Nambuthiri Brahmins.²⁸

According to the Parasurama tradition, all landed property came into hands of the Nambuthiri Brahmins as *dhanam*. The Nambuthiri land ownership was represented as divine dispensation and therefore inviolable. However, the new landowners neither cultivated the land nor supervised the cultivation. Owing to the caste rigidities, the Brahmin could not mingle with the lower cultivable class.²⁹ About the occupation of the Nambuthiri Brahmins, Subramani Aiyer writes that “service in temples, unless very remunerative, did not attract them.”³⁰

In Kerala such a system started the process of the transfer of ownership rights in favour of the Brahmins and the rulers. It created an important tenure in Kerala named ‘*kanam*’. The Brahmins divided the land into a number of ‘*desams*’ and in each, they created a ‘*kshetram*’, consecrated it and placed an image in them and performed *puja* with lamps and with prescribed rituals.³¹ The Brahmins established *adima* or bondage and *kudima* or husbandry protected *adiyar* or slaves and *kudiyar* or husbandmen.³²

The Brahmin land was an independent unit of production and required working families attached to it for the permanency of labour. Several families were permanently resorted to for the production as well as other functions.³³ The Brahmins were the major non-agricultural caste group in Kerala. But they could forge a strong relationship with the cultivating indigenous labour groups.³⁴ The emergence of a new caste

Nairs paved the way for a new and effective form of landlordism in Travancore.³⁵ Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai was the pioneer, who traced the origin of the landownership and Brahmin landlordism in Kerala. According to him, the private ownership of land began in Kerala even before the Sangam period.³⁶

Land has been the pivot of the economic structure of Kerala and no other parts of the world present such a bewildering variety of land tenures as Kerala did. They are almost unique in respect of their complexity and multiplicity of incidence. Broadly, there were three kinds of rights in land found in Kerala: They are (a) *Jenmam* or birth absolute tax free proprietorship, (b) Impure *jenmam*, absolute proprietorship but subject to a small tax and (c) various tenures. Parasurama divided the land among the Namboothiri Brahmins also acquired absolute right to the soil.³⁷

The land tenure system is a major factor shaping the economic history of the state. It was based on the *ryotwari* principle viz, the land principle of direct settlement with individual ryots or cultivators. The definition of the word tenure has not been laid down by any law in India. The word 'tenure' is derived from the Latin word '*teno*' which means 'the hold'.³⁸ In Kerala, the term 'land tenure' implies much more than mere rights in lands and compasses agricultural land ownership and

tenancy, land rents, taxation of agricultural land or income from land and even rural credit facilities.³⁹

There were different kinds of land tenures prevailed in Kerala⁴⁰. V.Nagam Aiya identified as many as 455 different type of land tenures in Kerala and each was different from the other. All of them had many local peculiarities also.⁴¹The following tenures are mentioned in the *Ayacut Tirattu* of 984 M.E of *Thodupuzha Mandpathum Vathukkal*.

(A) Devasam Vaka

(1) *Thirunilam Venpattam*, (2) *Atamnal pattam*, (3) *Neyyadum Cheri pattam*, (4) *Kottu viruthi*, (5) *Anubhogam*, (6) *Kanapattam*, (7) *Koothuviruthi*, (8) *Malaviruthi*, (9) *Adima*, (10) *Polikatam Thirunilam Venpattam*, (11) *Sanku viruthi*

(B) Brahmasvam Vaka

(1) *Venpattam*, (2) *Kanapattam*

(C) Pandaravaka

(1) *Pattam*, (2) *Uzhavotti*, (3) *Karanmatheetam*, (4) *Nair viruthi*, (5) *Munnila viruthi*, (6) *Cherumana viruthi*, (7) *Thiruvadayalam*, (8) *Kudumba Poruthi*, (9) *Anubhogam*, (10) *Kalpanpadi anubhogam*.⁴²

Besides these, multifarious kind of land tenures was also found in Kerala. They may be classified into two broad heads.

(1) *Jenmam* and (2) *Sirkar*.

The *Jenmam* land is again classified into three categories (a) *Jenmam* lands, which were entirely free, hold and exempt from payment of any revenue to the government under any circumstance. (b) *Jenmam* lands originally exempt from the payment of any revenue to the government, but which subsequently became liable to it under certain conditions; and (c) *Jenmam* property subject to the payment of a light demand.⁴³

Sirkar Lands

All other lands are known as *Sirkar* lands, liable to full assessment or pattern. It may be broadly subdivided into six categories:

(1) *Kandukrishi pattam*, (2) *Kuttaga pattam*, (3) *Vempattam*, (4) *Otti*,
(5) *Anubhogam or personal inams*, (6) *Uliam services*.⁴⁴

Kandukrishi Pattam

It is literally the home farm of the sovereign. Theoretically, the sovereign himself cultivates the lands. In this system, the seed and hire

in kind for cultivation used to be advanced to the actual tenants, and recovered with interest out of the harvest, of which they got for their share generally a little more than half the gross produce. However, later, the system was discontinued and the grain-rent alone was being recovered from the cultivators always in kind.

Kuttaga Pattam

Few lands that remained under this head were the purchase from the Dutch Paliport from the *jenmi* Pooliendurti, and the jungle lands called *kadukaval* forming the frontier defenses towards Cape Comerin. The system leads to the oppression of the tenants, is now discouraged altogether and the sanction of the ruler to a just adjustment of the remaining lands under this head has been received some time since.⁴⁵

Vempattam

The *vempattam* land was liable to paying full tax or assessment to the government. In the case of gardens, a general deduction of 25% was allowed as compensation to the owner for the cost and labour of the growing gardens. When an extra-ordinary draught or flood occurred, remissions on a larger scale were allowed as matter of grace.⁴⁶

Otti

Otti or *Pandaram Otti*, the term denotes a mortgage, the parties to the transaction being Sirkar on one side and the mortgagor and the riot on the other. It is, in fact, in one respect, legally different from a simple mortgage dealing *kanam* between a *jenmi*, who borrows and a tenant who lends the money.⁴⁷

Anubhogam

These are bondfide favourable or personal *inam* tenures not liable to pay assessment except the usual *rajabhogam* at $\frac{1}{6}$ and $\frac{1}{8}$.

Olium

Oozhiyam or viruthi tenures constitute the service *inams*. They are held either for services actually performed at the present time, or for quondam services; in the latter case, they have become almost *inams* held for personal benefits.⁴⁸ As a general rule, the former are inalienable, the latter, when alienated, became liable to fines known as *ottivelakum*. But even with regards to the former, a succession or *addukuvathu* duty was levied on every change of incumbency calculated at 50% of a year's rental or *pattam* for gardens and $2\frac{1}{2}$ *fanams* per *para* of paddy land. If the holder's family became extinct, the tenure was either transferred on payment of a high fine premium or *adiyara*, or sold to the highest bidder at a public auction when sometimes very high prices were realized.⁴⁹

The bulk of these tenures are the Nair *viruthis*, the holders of which were bound to supply at certain fixed prices vegetables and provisions for pagodas, *uttupuras* etc. The *viruthis* were also allowed to the people who raised sheds, to thatch public buildings, to watch them in some places and to do peon's duties occasionally. The Nair *viruthis* were held free of all assessment or *pattam*, but they were liable to the payment of the *rajabhogam* quit rents at $\frac{1}{8} \times c$, as already alluded to, and a fee called 'load tax' known as *chumattupanam* which was about 2 *fanams* payable on the *viruthi* in the lump.⁵⁰

The first land settlement was made in 984 M.E (1772-73) and after that Kerala regained all and lands included them within its present limits. The settlement was purported to comprise all cultivated lands, but it laid no pretension to any accuracy. It professed to be more than *kettezhuttu* or record of what was heard. The next settlement of 978 (1802-1803) was a *kandezhuttu* or record of what was seen. It was different from the previous settlement and the assessment of the land was fixed. The settlement comprised all the cultivated lands, wet as well as garden and dry, with the exception; however of *inam* lands, the unalienated land, Namboothiri *jenmis* and *devasvams*. The *kandukrishi* lands with the village belonging to the Edappalli chief, the freeholds of certain other chiefs and *devasvams* and *sripadam* lands etc. were included in this settlement.⁵¹ The settlement of 1012 M.E (1836-37) also

confirms that the lands of the same description and the assessment were not done in a uniformed manner.⁵²

In Kerala, the settlement department was started in 1058 M.E (1882-83). After the formation of the settlement department, a settlement proclamation was issued on 14th *Kumbam* 1061 (1885-86), which gave a definite shape to the scheme of land settlements. The Pandara Pattam Proclamation of 1865, carrying out a complete survey and re-assessment of the entire state embracing the accurate measurement, demarcation, marking and valuation of properties had even description and a registration of titles on the basis of a sound revenue administration. The Pandara Pattam Proclamation granted full ownership rights to the holders of the 200,000 acres of *sirkar pattam* land.⁵³

Dewan Madhava Rao also estimated that Rs.1.5 crores of land value was created by the Proclamation. The Proclamation put forward the following principles: in the first place, about the unit of measurement, the survey and settlement accounts were to be record the areas in terms of acres and cents, the equivalent of *parahs* and *edangalis* was also shown in the case of rice lands. Secondly, in regard to garden lands, the elaborate classification of coconut trees introduced at the previous settlements was to be done away with.⁵⁴ The Proclamation of 1865 also had certain important consequences for the Nair communities of Kerala. *Sirkar Pattam* land was now capable of providing cash for

education or the performance of costly ceremonies like *talikettukalyanam*, lavish celebrations of which enhanced a *tarawad's* prestige.

In 1867, the government issued another proclamation known as the *Jenmi-Kudiyam* Proclamation. The Proclamation curtailed the powers of *jenmis* in the state, who had become more demanding of their tenants as a result of the increasing population and value of land. The Proclamation of 1867 gave tenants security of tenure and virtually automatic renewal of leases without enhancement at the end of the 12 year agreements.⁵⁵ Madhava Rao planned for a third Proclamation to ensure the *jenmis* right, but it was not realized until 20 years later when the *jenmis* experiencing more and more difficulty with their tenants began to petition to the Sirkar.⁵⁶ According to the *jenmi-kudiyam* system, the ownership of the landed property rested in the hands of the *jenmis* who happened to be caste Hindus. Therefore, the tenants relegated to the background, when he was looked upon as merely an agent to work in the soil. It was the exclusive privilege of the higher castes to be the *jenmis* and a depressed class, who could not promoted to that position.⁵⁷

The hierarchical social structure of Kerala was formed strictly on land-based occupations. In the hierarchical social order, the landlords, who consisted of the ruling class *patanayar* who varied as *naduvazhies* of degree of prominence) on the top of the social hierarchy. The

Brahmins and the corporate body *ur/sabha* were at the top, their leaseholders known as *karalar*, who were mainly artisans and craftsmen in the middle, the primary producers or *adiyalar* were at the bottom of the society.⁵⁸ Therefore, in the social structure of Kerala, the non-cultivating landlords were at the top, whereas the tillers of the land were at the bottom of the social hierarchy.⁵⁹ The actual tillers constituted the major servile group in Kerala and their privilege was only the *adiyanma* or servility. The servile groups were always attached to the agricultural lands and they were transacted along with land as things. The landlords ideologically and physically suppressed these servile groups and accumulated the surplus wealth from the *adiyars*.⁶⁰

The society of Kerala was stratified into various gradations like '*udayavar*', '*uralar*', '*karalar*' and '*adiyar*' etc. Important factor in the social organization of Kerala appears to have been the rise and growth of several Brahmin settlements known as *Ur* and *Grammam*, which had sprung up in the post-Sangam period.⁶¹ In the 8th century A.D, vast areas of land had been brought under the plough for the cultivation of rice, and a huge chunk of tribal population was transformed into peasants. It resulted in the production of unprecedented surplus and through its unequal distribution, a crystallization of social stratification.⁶² The Brahmin corporations and organizations around the temples initiated the process, which influenced the economy and society of Kerala.

The Brahmins were organized into four *kalakams* or *ghatka* under the leadership of Perumcellur, Payyannur, Paravur and Chengannur.⁶² Each of the four *grammoms*, there appointed a *rakshapurusha* or protector for three years. When the Brahmins realized that the system became corrupted or broken down its arrangements, the Brahmins assembled at Tirunavay and decided that they must have a king and entrusted the work to the four *kalakams*. Therefore the Brahmins brought the Kshatriya Prince and Princes from outside and made the Prince to the *Perumal* or King of *Malanatu* and married the Princes to a Brahmin and decided that the offspring shall be a Kshatriya. The ruler was under the habitual tutelage of the Brahminical establishment. The ruler had a council of Brahmin advisors called '*nalutali*'. The references to the *nalutali*, show the power and influence of the Aryan Brahmin settlements and it is further elucidated by the reverential attitude shown by these Kshatriya kings towards Brahmins and orthodox Hindu institutions.⁶⁴

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