

‘Yakki’ and ‘Kuruthi’ – A Study of the Female Offices of Pre-Perumal Period

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It is rather difficult to reconstruct a fully fledged, tangible history of Pre-modern Kerala. The lack of concrete evidences have created a big gap in the historical scenario of the period. In the backdrop of existing sources what we have is only a history focused on temple as the nerve centre. The history of the marginalised, especially the representation of women in pre modern times is more or less concealed and no solid research has been made which focuses on women in the light of sources. The paper tries to explore such marginalisation in the influx of patriarchal society in the light of land deeds.

Deeds and Women–Necessity of New Perception

The genesis of writing and documentation in Kerala is closely linked to the expansion of Jainism and Buddhism and further accelerated by the growth and consolidation of Brahmin Settlements and temples.¹ But the so called deeds developed when certain factors tended to embark a social and economic transformation. The ascendancy of a strong power i.e., the Perumals and the escalation of Brahmin supremacy is contemporaneous with the change in the pattern of agriculture and agrarian relations which in turn created a necessity of keeping records for posterity. Also the authentication of new rights and privileges and countering the future claims require written transactions.

The object of deeds was not only the legitimisation of rights but also superimposing such rights and privileges over the early occupants. The entity of women in such inscriptions is of much significance as they figure as donors as well as recipients of certain grants². But historians had not tried to explore the participation of women in donor-receiver category. Women were portrayed as rather invisible in the documents. But the terms which figure in the records like 'Kuruthi', 'Yakki' etc. connotes the traditional offices held by women and their absence in the later inscriptions point towards the deprivation of their rights, developed in the backdrop of the emergence of the Perumal rule. Of the inscriptions which elucidate women's presence, Chitalar Inscriptions, Tiruvalla Copper Plates, Chembara inscriptions etc. are notable.

Inscription Enunciating the Existence of Female Guru

The presence of prosperous, erudite, self determining women can be seen in Chitalar inscriptions pertaining to Ay kingdom. Chitalar was a Jain centre till the early decades of 20th century. A few records from Chitalar is significant in this context. One record speaks of a stipulation made for providing a lamp at Tiruchaaranam and the temple is said to have constructed by a Kuruthiyar.³ This 'Kuruthi' is referred to as important among the disciples of a Jain monk. The second inscription also enunciate a female disciple of one Arattanami Pattiyar named Kunandangi Kuruthigal granting golden ornaments to the temple.⁴ The donor mentioned in an inscription near Tirunelveli is also a *Kuruthi*. There is at present no concrete evidence to support the function of Kuruthi and the title can be equated with their profession. M.R. Raghava Warriar views Kuruthi as the feminine gender of the term Guru.⁵ The label 'disciple' indicate that they were learned people and also professional and the inscriptions also reveal that they were economically sound and independent enough to grant gold and even consecrate a temple.

Emergence of Salais and Waning of Kurutti

The period preceding the Perumal rule is more or less silent regarding the nature of education. It has been argued that the skill of writing was confined to a minority. Tirucharanam is regarded as a great Jain centre of education where both male and female functioned as trainees. Kuruthi may be a group who imparted learning in these areas. Jain female teachers identified as disciples of male monks reflect that education was imparted to male and female alike in Tirucharanam. The inscriptions are clear indicators of their financial position and it implies the fact that female teachers like their counterparts must have been greatly patronised and held in great esteem in the Pre-Perumal period. But what is significant is that the term Kuruthi is not mentioned in the later inscriptions which suggest that they might have lost their status and independence in the later stages. They might have either pushed back to the interior tracts or might have assimilated themselves to Brahmanical culture losing their rights and identity.

The implementation of Salais or temple educational institutions in the Perumal period points to the effective means of controlling the education in the hands of the male Brahmins. As Elamkulam points out, the practise of establishing educational institutions in the precincts of temples might have copied from Buddhists or Jains⁶. The terms Chattas and Bhattas figuring in the inscriptions, connoting student and teacher respectively, have no female counterpart like Kuratti for Kuruvan.⁷ The inscriptions throwing light on the Salais make it clear that they were restricted to male students only and some of the Salais even forbid female servants from entering into its precincts. Inscriptions pertaining to Brahmanical temples are silent regarding female instructors while Bhattas or Bhattiyar are referred in many of the inscriptions.

Salais played an important role in maintaining the authority of Brahmins and temples. The admission to the Salais was restricted to Brahmins alone. As evidenced by inscriptions, these educational institutions were greatly endowed with land grants and other services both by rulers and private individuals. The acknowledgement of state and upper class segments for the patriarchisation of educational system through Salais might have deposed other groups like Kuruthi from educational centres. Salais strictly adhering to the teaching of Vedas and military training might have gradually overpowered the Jain educational institutions which might have resulted in the disappearance of female gurus.⁸

The deprivation of the rights and privileges of women is clearly noticeable in an inscription from Chitalaral of 14th century. It discusses the transfer of certain lands to a group called *Padamulam*⁹ for the conduct of temple affairs. The *karanmai* or the right of cultivable land was earlier enjoyed by the female members of a family for rendering service to the temple. It also says that if any default arose the duties shall be left again to the female line.¹⁰ It clearly indicates the dispossession of the property and office earlier enjoyed by women in Tirucharanam.

Indication of Specialised Offices of Women

Tiruvalla copper plates, the lengthiest of all copper plates in Kerala is also important in the context of gender. Tiruvalla is considered to be one of the important Brahmin Settlement in Southern Kerala. The plates specify the names of several women either as donor or as recipient. Of this one striking remark is an endowment made by 'Bhadracharini' and 'Uttaracharini'.¹¹ These offices do not figure in any other inscriptions of Kerala. But the way in which the reference is made in Tiruvalla plates suggest that the terms are much familiar to the people of the time that there was no need of further explanation in the

copper plate and the terms suggest an office or a position held during the period. When Tiruvalla temple became a full-fledged brahmnical centre, these professional groups who held official status in the earlier period might have been forced to acknowledge the ascendancy of brahmanical power and their rights might have gradually transferred to temples and gradually their identity might have disappeared in the grip of new professional hierarchy based on temple administration.

Yakkis as Temple Personnel

Tiruvalla plates denote the presence of Yakkis (Yakshi)¹². It speaks of a Yakkan giving gold to the temple and the same amount of gold provided by his wife one Yakkiamma for the expense of temple.¹³ It also refer to 16 nazhi (a measure, one nazhi is around 250 gms.) of rice to be given to Mahayakki , Kuruvan etc. daily for their service to the temple.¹⁴

Yakshan and Yakshi are generally referred to as protectors of Tirtankaras of Jainism.¹⁵ The term Yakkan is referred in many of the inscriptions of Kerala and Yakki in a few records. Most of the inscriptions describe the endowments given by Yakshas to temples from which it is clear that they were powerful authority during the period under concern.

Prior to the emergence of Brahmin supremacy they might have functioned as protector of temple. The term Mahayakki appears only once in the inscription and she was provided grant along with Kuruvan(Guru) and priests. It implies that she had an important position in the society and may be an important official of the period.

People who were not the resident of Tiruvalla also figures as donors. One among them, Raman Mattevi of Munninadu gave her lands together with their tenants to god.¹⁶ It shows that women not only possessed lands but also had the authority to transfer tenants along with the

land. Tiruvalla also records the plot of land assigned by nayattiyar for feeding students¹⁷.

Chembara inscription during the reign of Indukotha is also important in the context. The inscription indicates how forcefully the laws have been imposed through deeds. It refers to one Yakshan and his family and says that Yakkan, his mother and aunt should jointly live (Koodi Vazhka) in a settlement (the name of the settlement is given as Mayilkkara) and provide two and half Nazhi of rice to the temple daily. The inscription also stipulates the name of others who had to provide grants to meet the expenses of the temple¹⁸. Chembara inscription is a sure indicator of how precisely such donations were beneficial in the growth of a temple and how the Jain possessions got transferred to temple property. These stone inscriptions are engraved in such a way as to catch the attention of people. The indication of the punishments on those who violate the provisions suggest that the target of punishments were not uralars but those group whose right were being transferred to temple. Chembara indicates that women possess certain rights and privileges along with their male members. The inscription is a clear indication of the pressure forced upon a community who were in a position to provide grants and other financial support to the temple.

Proliferation of temple deeds and oppression of women

The inscriptions indirectly signify the need of license to control a faction of people who might be the original occupants of the rights and privileges enjoyed by temple. Tiruvalla plates indirectly indicate the accumulation of property from many sections of people to temple. Deeds acted as the symbol of authority of temples over the rest of population. As Rosalind Thomas point out inscribing deeds were to make the people memorial of the decision¹⁹. The decisions enforced by the temples were not only for

the smooth functioning of temple activities but it also forbid the early occupants from several rights and privileges. The hereditary character of the later servants attached to temples must have undermined the status of early officers. It was through these processes of marginalisation and exercise of power that the ruling authority and Brahmins kept the large section of society including women of different grades under their control. The contents in the records indirectly signify that many of the provisions were forcibly imposed.

Some of the characteristics of the documents include the mentioning of minute details of rights in case many functionaries and population were incorporated. The indication of each and every right in deeds like Tiruvalla Copper Plate show that the document was meant for a larger section of society who were unfamiliar with such practises. Punishments given to those who interrupt the rights and privileges were given in inscriptions. There were certain rules and regulations for the smooth conduct of temples known by the name Kachams. M.G.S. Narayanan and Kesavan Veluthat points out that these regulations were not to control the temple proprietors but to prevent any act that may prove detrimental to Brahmins and their properties.²⁰ So these Kachams aims at temple servants, villagers, officials and women.

Some inscriptions do suggest that women enjoyed rights over land and other properties. But in many of the deeds the physical presence of the female donors were not seen. They do not appear as witnesses or signatories and majority of the inscriptions figure them as mother, wife or daughter except the above mentioned ones i.e., they are often described in terms of their relationship to men. In inscriptions also the description of the functions of men are given much importance and with more details than women. That is why a notion has been constructed

generally that women did not play a vital role in temple centred society of early medieval Kerala.

Thus the early inscriptions indirectly reveal a gendered perspective of early medieval Kerala. These offices were probably well established in Pre Perumal period. As they might have functioned as public offices and their social and political status were widely recognised during the period. They also functioned as an important node of social and economic power. But the beginning of Perumal Period marked a shift towards new social relations based on hierarchy, unequal rights and patriarchal authority which led to the disappearance of the whole set of female employees.

Notes

1. The spread and implications of writing has been discussed in detail by Dr. Rajan Gurukkal. See Rajan Gurukal, *Social Formations of Early South India*, New delhi, 2010, pp.272-287.
2. Many of the inscriptions of like Tiruvalla Copper plates, Chitalar, Chembara etc. speak of women granting lands, gold etc. to temples and receiving land and rice as part of their services.
3. *Travancore Archaeological Series Vol 4*, Trivandrum, 1999 (Reprint) pp. 146-148.
4. *Travancore Archaeological Series Vol 1*, Trivandrum, 1988 (Reprint) pp. 284-8
5. M.R. Raghava Warriar, *Jainamadham Keralathil*, Kottayam, 2012, p.21
6. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, *Studies in Kerala History*, Trivandrum, 1970, p.268.
7. For more details on Chattas and Bhattas see Elamkulam op.cit., pp. Also Kesavan Veluthat, *Brahmin Settlements in Kerala*, Calicut, 1978, pp.102-111.
8. M.G.S. Narayanan quotes from a Jain work of 8th c.

Composed by Udyotanasuri that the work presents Chattars impoliteness towards women which gives a hint that unlike the jain educational centres which honour Kurattis, Chattas in salais were rather impudent towards women. See M.G.S. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*, Calicut, 1996, p.192.

9. Padamulam may be temple servants. They were mentioned in some of the inscriptions especially pertaining to Jains.
10. T A S Vol. IV Part-II p.148.
11. Puthussery Ramachandran, *Keralacharithrathinte Adistanarekhakal*, Thiruvanthapuram, 2007, pp.244-299
12. V.V. Haridas give two interpretations to the label of yakkan and yakki in inscriptions. The term either suggest the extent of the popularity of Yaksha- Yakshi concept during the period or Yakas may be a group of devotees of Yaksha and Yakshi who used this label. See V.V. Haridas, *Yakshi Sankalpam* , Kottayam, 2016, p.61.
13. T A S Vol. 2, 1992, (Reprint), p.151
14. T A S Vol. II p. 149.
15. Each Tirthankara has their own Yaksha and Yakshi for security. For example, Govadhana and Chakreswari for Rishabanatha and Guhyaka and Siddayika for Mahavira (See M.R. Raghava Warriar p.1)
16. For details of different groups see T A S Vol. 2 pp.136-158.
17. 17. ibid p.153.
18. M.R. Raghava Warriar, *Keraliyadha Charitramanangal*, pp.99-103.
19. Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge, 1992. p. 69.
20. M.G.S. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*, op.cit., pp.114-120 and Kesavan Veluthat, Brahmin... op.cit. p.58.