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Hierarchy and Social Order: Ritual Functionaries in the Temple Sankethams of Pre-Modern Kerala

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Abstract

The medieval temple in Kerala functioned as a central institution that shaped social organization, ritual practices, economic relations, and caste formation. The formation of temple functionaries was the unique feature of the early medieval temple society. Most of the temples were maintained various service groups. The major share of the temple wealth was redistributed for the maintenance of the service groups attached to the temple. The service factions including Brahmin and non-Brahmin elite of the temples received rewards for their service. This article examines the evolution of temple rites and servant communities in medieval Kerala with reference to the temple sankethams of pre modern Kerala. It argues that temple institutions simultaneously enabled social mobility for certain occupational groups while reinforcing hierarchical dependence and caste stratification.

Introduction

The organisation of temple service in medieval Kerala played a decisive role in moulding the structured caste system by enforcing a rigid hierarchy of labour. Hereditary service roles fixed occupational identities across generations, gradually transforming functional divisions of labour into rigid social categories. Consequently, temples operated as powerful agents of caste formation, binding together occupation, ritual privilege, and social status within a single institutional framework.The social history of medieval Kerala cannot be understood without examining the centrality of temples as institutions that mediated religion, economy, polity, and culture. The medieval Kerala society was increasingly structured around agrarian production, land control, and ritual authority. Temples emerged as focal points in this transformation, acting not merely as places of worship but as powerful corporate institutions controlling land, labour, and surplus .The significant outcomes of temple expansion was the proliferation of servant and artisan communities whose labour was indispensable to the performance of rituals, festivals, administration, and daily functioning of temple society.Their roles were regulated through hereditary service obligations, land grants, and ritual privileges.This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive historical analysis of temple rites and servant communities in medieval Kerala by integrating economic, cultural and institutional perspectives.

According to the temple inscriptions the temple-centred brahman settlements had become well established by the 9th century with extensive control over the fertile tracts of Kerala. They had become extremely well-consolidated and were growing into secondary settlements. Keraḷõlpatti, the traditional

chronicle of the Kerala brahmans mentions Thirty-two of the sixty-four settlements were part of the Tulu region of Karnataka, while the remaining settlements were part of Kerala.Long before the Chera Kingdom of Mahodayapuram was established, Brahmin communities were established in Kerala. It is said that the Brahmins in Kerala initially settled in thirty-two villages. However, they expanded, creating new villages by combining aspects of pre-existing ones and uniting two or more settlements to create larger ones. The Namboothiri Brahmins formed sixty four settlements initially, thirty two of which were in the Tulu region and thirty two of which were in Kerala.[1]

In medieval Kerala temples acted as the main intermediaries between Brahmins and the common people .There are two kinds of temples in south India; one is dedicated to the higher Gods of Hindus and others in commemoration of the village deities. The native people revered the local gods and the spirits of their ancestors. It was transformed by the encounter of the indigenous inhabitants with the migrating population. As a result of this Brahmin settlement of Kerala, the indigenous Gods were entirely brahmanised. In certain instances, the two tribes gods merged to create a single caste system. [2]

Formation of a feudal power structure in medieval Kerala, where the Sanketam played the function of a feudal chieftain and the Sanketam benefited from a somewhat higher position because of religious support, did not alter the organization's fundamental nature as a feudal structure. Namboothiri Brahmin's economic hegemony and ideological legitimization had made them a determinant force of political authority.Sańketam was ruled by the members of the dēvasvam and sabhāyōgam, together with a king that they designated to serve as its guardian.A sańkētam was a sovereign land governed by dēvasvam, yōgam, and a designated guardian. A king was always the recipient of the kōymasthānam. [3] P.K.S Raja has described Sankethams as independent jurisdictions beyond the control of the sovereign or local chieftains who were simply protectors of these jurisdictions.[4]They governed and administered the temple grounds with the assistance of this secular monarch. The temple states belongs to the Brahmins and the territory under their rule was called Sanketham and no one could enter the Sanketham without permision. 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 soverign states with a well defined territory of their own called Sankettams.[5] 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 reflects this poltical encounter.

In Kerala, temple management is often governed by a detailed array of rituals and rules that reflect both spiritual traditions and social stratification. The Namboodiri Brahmins, traditionally the priests in Kerala's temples, have historically held considerable sway. They are regarded as the connectors between the

divine and the believers, granting them a significant level of religious influence. The rituals, conducted with precision by the priests, shape the power relationship between the temple's sacred environment and its worshippers.The studies on early history of Keralam have shown that the formation of caste was the result of the growth of brahmanical social order and the temple centred occupational hierarchies.The accumulation of wealth by Brahmins made them the dominant groups in society.

As the largest landowning institution the dominant Brahmin caste were delegated as the superintendent of the Temples and became an essential part of the socio-economic life of a settlement .With the establishment of extensive control over the fertile tracts, Temple centered Brahmin settlements emerged as an exploitative leadership in Kerala society. They came to acquire the status of wealthy and powerful landlords or janmis. Before that the land was owned by those who tilled the soil which soon changed and they had to accept the ownership right of the Brahmins over the land. This led to the new order of the society.[6]

In medieval Kerala, temple administration was highly organized, operating through a multi-layered structure that oversaw rituals and social regulation. The temple was the most important centre of resource mobilisation and redistribution. This does not mean that the paddy was mobilised and stored in the temple. Dues to the temple were collected by the brahmaṇa landlords as members of the various ganams that were entrusted with the responsibility of meeting expenditures of specific functions and services in the temple. [7]These institutions were not informal or strictly religious; they were, in fact, structured as corporate bodies with explicit roles, duties, and mechanisms for accountability. These administrative bodies played a key role in ensuring uninterrupted ritual practices, efficiently managing temple resources, and regulating the communities that relied on the temple for their livelihood.

At the apex of temple administration stood the Ūrāḷar composed primarily of local Brahmin elites and landed proprietors. The Ūrāḷar functioned as custodians of temple property and ritual purity. They exercised authority over land grants, confirmed service obligations, adjudicated disputes, and represented the temple in interactions with royal power**.**The Samudayam was originally the committee of management who managed on behalf of the body of the Uralans. Sometimes the management was vested in a single Uralan who became Samudayi. The term subsequently came to be applied to any person appointed as an agent to the Uralans. Sometimes the office is hereditary. "Any temple servant who possesses an hereditary right to perform any particular service in a temple is said to be a Karala.The Pattamali is the rent collector and is usually a mere paid servant of the Uralans but his office is sometimes hereditary.The Uralans have no right to alienate trust property but may create subordinate tenures in accordance with local usage. They have no authority to transfer their office and its duties together with the trust property to a stranger **.**[8]

Temple as a landed institution controlled the society and economy.The temple employed a large number of people in its various services on the basis of system of service tenure. The Brahmana landlords were the custodians of the temple wealth, the members of the village corporation .The learned priests of vedic scholarship, had highest socio-economic and ritual status.They gradually emerged as separate group called tantrikal and secluded themselves from the rest of the brahmanas. Other brahmanas received lands as reward

for their services to the temple and came to be known as bhattur, chathirar and santhi. The internal division among the brahmanas was based on their entitlement to lands. Land control was the base for the hierarchical division among the non-brahmana order.[9]

Those who did managerial and executive responsibilities in the temples and members of the temple committee were given virutti as reward, came to be known as potuval and variyar respectively. Other functionaries of the temple such as drummers, dancers and musicians were rewarded land as virutti and began to be constituted separate jati. The foremost among the non-brahmana order was karalar. Most of the temple lands and individual brahman holdings were leased-out to them. On the basis of land control as well as their association with brahmanas and naduvazhis they could have elevated their position and came to be known variously as varma, panikkar, menon ete. Because of the functional obligation and condition of immobility, the craftsmen and artisan groups were permanently attached to the temple society, rendered their services to the temple as well as to the individual brahman holdings. Temples thus functioned as links between central authority and local society, not only sanctified royal power but also, acted as, essential centers for governance, dispute settlement, and social organization.

Temple governance in medieval Kerala was hierarchically structured, with authority concentrated at the top in the hands of the Ūrāḷar or Ūr assemblies, largely constituted by Brahmin elites and dominant landholders of the locality. Subordinate to them were the Poduvāḷ, who acted as executive functionaries managing the routine affairs of the temple. Their responsibilities included executing decisions taken by the Ūrāḷar, organizing ritual timetables, supervising temple servants, and arranging the procurement of materials necessary for worship. Financial oversight rested with the Variyar, who functioned as treasurers and record-keepers. They maintained accounts of temple revenue and expenditure, supervised agricultural output from temple lands, and ensured the proper allocation of wages, offerings, and ritual allowances. Collectively, these administrative institutions ensured order, continuity, and discipline in temple life, regulating not only ritual procedures but also the behavior and duties of temple servants.

The temple was the most important centre of resource mobilisation and redistribution. Apart from the professional castes, the temple had a lot of non specialized workers who performed the functions of menial servants. They were atikkumavar (sweepers), virakitumavar (suppliers of firewood), ilayiptomavar (suppliers of plantain leaves), vâyirkkalaniskkumavar (gatekeepe arikütsumavar (rice-pounders), viḷakketukkumnambi (the lamp-attender and atakkainalkumavar (distributor of areca nuts). These functionaries did not seem to have formed themselves into profession-labelled castes, since various sub-castes of the temple functionaries indulged in these kinds of services. For instance, in the Kerala temple the sweeper of the holy courtyard was a variyan. Most of tth temple property and the individual holdings of the brahmaṇas were leased out to karalar who were primarily of the non-brahmana order

In addition to the employees directly associated with the daily rituals of the temple, there were a few artisans and craftsmen (kammalar) who were settled within the limits of the temple centred village and obliged to render their services to the temple as well as the village. Inscriptions refer to taccar (carpenters), kalavaniyar

(potters), vaniyar (oil-mongers), and vannár (washermen), brought to settle in the temple-centred society. The pulayar and cerumar, who were the actual tillers, constituted the base of the society. They were the most servile group, purchased and sold as goods and transacted along with the land.It appears that all service in the temple had a relatively high and appreciable socio-ritual status. The brahma functioned as sabhaiyar in the caste corporation, as parasaiyar in the execurive committee of the temple, as gayattar in the endowment trusts called ganam as tantri, the agamic instructor of the temple, bhatta, the Vedic teacher.[10]

Despite this structural subordination, certain skilled service groups such as artisans, ritual performers, and musicians gained symbolic prestige and limited privileges due to their indispensability to temple functioning.The medieval temple in Kerala functioned far beyond its role as a religious institution. It emerged as a multifunctional centre that structured economic relations, ritual practice, cultural production, and social hierarchy in a deeply integrated manner. Temples acted simultaneously as landholding corporations, centres of redistribution, ritual authorities, cultural conservators, and instruments of social regulation. Ritual specialists ensured liturgical continuity; artisans produced architectural, ritual, and festival material; Performers transmitted sacred narratives through music, dance, and drama; and service workers maintained ritual purity and spatial order.Instrumental music formed an integral part of the temple service. There were drummers known as Koṭṭikaḷ or Uvaccakal in temples.[11] The structured, hierarchical relationships found in everyday worldly life were mirrored within the spiritual realm. This divine setup featured a main deity, their consorts, numerous lesser deities, and a large, organized group of temple servants including priests, artists, and attendants mimicking a courtly structure. This arrangement suggests that temple operations were less a mere administrative structure and more a reflection of a feudal system built on bonds of loyalty, personal devotion, and obligatory service. .[12]

The temples operated simultaneously as landholding corporations, redistributive institutions, ritual authorities, cultural custodians, and instruments of social regulation.While temple service provided livelihood through wages, land grants, and hereditary rights, it also tied the communities in to enduring relations of dependence. The institutionalization of hereditary service transformed functional labour divisions into rigid occupational identities, which turned to caste formations. Thus the study of temple rites and communities offers crucial insights into the formation of medieval Kerala society.Embedded within temple institutions, these elements established enduring, hierarchical structures that maintained stability and orderly continuity.

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