

# Religious Harmony in Early Medieval Kerala - A Historical Review

Ajayakumar S., Assistant Professor, Department of History, NSS College, Nilamel

**Abstract:-** The liberal attitude of the rulers and subjects of Kerala and tolerance towards other religions created a cultural synthesis in the land. Liberal land grants of Hindu rulers to Christian churches and acceptance of Muslim traders as the natives of Kerala added to this religious harmony. The history of religious harmony and liberal attitude of the land is reviewed in this article with the help of inscriptions.

## Introduction

Kerala has a cosmopolitan and composite culture. The rich cultural heritage of Kerala is a synthesis of different religions and traditions both indigenous and foreign. Kerala's culture is a practical embodiment of tolerance being practiced throughout the centuries. Different communities and religious groups live in complete harmony and proper mutual understanding for centuries. Once the cultural traditions of other regions arrived at Kerala they were assimilated and synthesized to the indigenous culture and paved way for the growth of a common culture. The Tamil Sangam culture, Buddhism, Jainism, and Vedic religion, jews, christianity and Islam have arrived and flourished in this land.

**Content:**

The people in the land of Kerala followed nature worship and Dravidian religious practices from very early period. Kerala was part of Ancient Tamilakam even though it was separated geographically by the Western Ghats. The impact and assimilation of Tamil Sangam culture is visible in Kerala. Sangam works like Purananuru gives a detailed description of the geography people and rulers of Kerala. The early inhabitants of Kerala such as kuravar, vetar, parayar, paravar etc. have mention in the Tinai concept of early sangam works. The Tamil literary tradition followed in the region for several centuries. Every inscription of early medieval Kerala was written in classical Tamil language and *vattezhuthu* script like those found in the territories of Pandyan kings. They follow the same pattern of land donations and organization of agrarian settlements as they followed in Tamil region.

During the Sangam age itself Buddhism was prominent in the Chola, Chera and Pandya countries. Ilamkulam Kunjan Pillai says Jainism and Buddhism were in existence along with Brahmanism in Kerala.<sup>1</sup> Kollam, Alapuzha districts of Kerala were the citadel of Buddhism in Kerala. Srimulavasam was once a known Buddhist pilgrim centre of Kerala and the Buddha faith was firmly established in the very centre of Malabar. Paliyam plate of Vikramaditya varaguna in the second half of ninth century AD shows his veneration towards the son of Suddhodana, Dharma and Sangha. He made a grant of land to the Buddhist vihara of Srimulavasam. The king also appointed Vira Kota for the protection of the land and he adorns Vira Kota as blessed by Hindu Goddess Lakshmi. Inscription describes him as belonging to Yadhava family.<sup>2</sup> Thus Hindu rulers of Kerala granted innumerable land and revenue rights to the Buddhist monks.

The large number of Buddha images found in the Mavelikkara, Kunnathur, Karunagapalli and Ambalapuzha Taluks clearly indicate the prevalence of the faith. In several villages of South Kerala there exhibits elegantly constructed cars known as *Kettukalchai*. These temporary structures are mounted upon wheels and dragged in front of temples. The Chinese traveler Fahian says about the preparation of four wheeled cars on which they erect bamboo stages supported by spears having the appearance of a tower covered with white clothes.<sup>3</sup> The images, procession, festival etc in Hindu temples is believed to be a legacy of Buddhism. The Sastha Ayyappan is believed to be a Hindu version of Buddha. The location of Sastha temples in the interior of forests, vows and non violence etc. shows its resemblance to Buddhism.

Several Malayalam dialects were derived from Pali language which was in common use by the Buddhist monks. For example in Pali *ashtangamarga* (eight fold path) are *samma dithi, sama vaka, sama sankappa, sama vayamma, sama ajiva, sama kammanta, sama sati, sama samadhi*.<sup>4</sup> In Malayalam *vachaka, sankalpa, vyayama, jiva, karmma, sati, samadi* with same Pali synonym exists. That much synthesise of Buddhist culture took place in our land.

The Naga worship in Kerala is the legacy of Jain tradition. In many of the epigraphs there is mention of Yakkinis, which is an innovation of South Indian Jainism. Yakkinis are Jaina female deities.<sup>5</sup> Chitalar inscription in

<sup>1</sup> Kunjan Pillai Ilamkulam, *Studies in Kerala History*, National Books, Kottayam, 1970, p.137.

<sup>2</sup> T.A. Gopinatha Rao(ed), *Travancore Archaeological Series (vol. I)*, Department of Cultural Publications, Government of Kerala, 1988, p.283.

<sup>3</sup> T.A. Gopinatha Rao(ed), *Travancore Archaeological Series (vol. II)*, Department of Cultural Publications, Government of Kerala, 1992, pp.11-130

<sup>4</sup> www.buddhanet.net/nutshell11.htm

<sup>5</sup> T Madhavamenon, *A Hand Book of Kerala History Vol I*, International School of Dravidian Linguistics, Trivandrum, 2000, p.201.

the hill of Tiruchchnattumalai describes the donation made by Vikramaditya Varaguna to the Jaina temple of Chitalar. This hill top temple contains the images of Patmavati Devi, Mahavira and Parsvanatha.<sup>6</sup>

The support given to the Vedic religion in Kerala is profound. Though historians assign the process of aryanization or Brahmanization from the 8th or 9<sup>th</sup> century, in several historical documents there were evidence for the spread of Vedic religion even before that. Thousands of land grants made by the Kerala rulers institutionalized the process of Brahmanization. According the MGS Narayanan Aryanization resulted in ‘a highly developed form of temple-oriented Hinduism is found to be holding a dominant position in the field of religion but the prevailing mood was that of tolerance of other creeds leading to peaceful co-existence like that of wild animals forgetting their natural conflicts in the vicinity of an asrama’.<sup>7</sup>

Tamil, Tulu and Kannada Brahmans came to Kerala in different batches and they settled thorough the state and amalgamated to its culture. In Travancore the Tamil Brahmins held high posts of civil administration. In Calicut Tulu Brahmans enjoyed this privilege. Every part of Kerala was settled by Tamil speaking people who were engaged in ornament works and installed their traditional deities such as murugan, Amman etc.

Jews and early Christians received support and patronage form the rulers of Kerala. Hebrew inscriptions from paraur is a best example. Kollam Tarisapalii copperplate of 880 AD had a Hebrew signatory.<sup>8</sup> Cochi Jewish plate of 1085 AD is another example for the land grants to the Jews. Palayangadi near Mount Eli in North Malabar seems to have had a colony of Jews. Crangannore also had Jewish settlement. Anchuvannam possibly a mercantile guild dominated by the Jews appear as signatories in several early medieval documents.

Tarisapalli plate deserves special mention as it records the grant of land along with 4 women of Izhava caste together with their eight children, one family of washerman, four Vellalas were given to the Church for menial service. They are exempted from paying tax. Church is made custodian of several taxes. The right of trying the cases of the people was given to the church. 72 privilages, including collection of custom duty and monopoly of trade were given to the Tarisa Palli by Ayyanadigal Tiruvadigal ruler of Venad.<sup>9</sup> It is to be noted that a Hindu ruler granting these much

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<sup>6</sup> T.A. Gopinatha Rao(ed), *op.cit.*, (vol. I), pp.283-287.

<sup>7</sup> M.G.S. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*, Cosmo Books, Thrissur, 2013, pp. 23-24.

<sup>8</sup> T.A. Gopinatha Rao(ed), *op.cit.*, (vol. II), pp.60-72.

<sup>9</sup> K.K.Ramachandran Nair, ‘*Venad: Its Early History*’, Journal of Kerala Studies (vol. XIV, Part1-4), Department of History, University of Kerala, 1987, p.3.

privileges to the Christians and giving the lower caste Hindus as the servants of Christians. Wherever could you see these much support to a foreign religion. Anyone can criticise this from the view point of caste system. But a researcher could found a strong spirit of religious tolerance in this inscription.<sup>10</sup>

The first mosque of India is situated at Kodungallur which stands as an embodiment of religious reverence of Cheraman Perumal. He accepted Islam and went to learn more from its prophet. The rulers of Kerala found Muslims as their close associates in their maritime trade. The Kunjali marakkars were made admirals by the Zamorines of Calicut. Every ancient port of medieval Kerala was dominated by the Arab merchants. Islam became second dominant religion in Kerala due to the support given to them by the rulers and subjects of Kerala. Sangunni menon say “In 855 M.E. (1680A.D.) a petty sirdar under the Mughal Emperor invaded southern part of Travancore. But a few faithful Mahomedan (Muslim) servants attached to the Travancore house saved the kingdom by persuading the Mughal sirdar not to demolish Trivandrum Pagoda and other places of worship or to convert any of the Hindu to Mohammedanism.<sup>11</sup> This favorable attitude of the Muslims happened because of the tolerance and affection Travancore royal family had towards them.

The Christian missionaries were given outstanding support to spread education in Kerala. In Trivandrum, Kottayam, pathanamthitta, Ernakulam and Kannur they were provided huge land in the heart of the cities to establish seminaries. The Travancore royal family donated acres of land near to their palace and pagoda for Christian missionaries to establish their church and schools. The rulers of Kerala exhibited these much tolerance and acceptance to other religions. There are instances of churches which have come to be established on the ruins of the temples. One instance in point is the historic C.S.I Church at Koottikal in Meenachil Taluk which was set up on the site of an old temple in ruins, with the basement of the temple itself serving as the foundation of the new church building.<sup>12</sup>

The arrival of the greedy and crooked industrial Europeans inaugurated an era of religious conflict and intolerance in our land. Forcible conversions and religious persecutions were the legacy of that greedy Europeans especially from the time of the Portuguese. Now, it is the time for us to think whether we have to continue the legacy of religious tolerance and learning of other religions we inherited from the history of early medieval Kerala or to succumb to the intolerance and crooked ways of conversion we inherited from the greedy Europeans who devastated the country economically, socially and culturally.

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<sup>10</sup> T.A. Gopinatha Rao(ed), *op.cit.*, (vol. II), pp.60-72.

<sup>11</sup> Shungoony Menon, *History of Travancore*, Kerala Books and Publishing society, Cochin, 1983, pp.75-76.

<sup>12</sup> A Sreedhara Menon, *Cultural Heritage of Kerala - An introduction*, East west publications pvt. Ltd., 1978, p.62.