



The Socio-Economic Base of The Jain Religio-Cultural Groups in Medieval Kerala: An Overview

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KEYWORDS

The spread of the heterodox religions like Jainism and Buddhism from the mid- Gangetic valley to Kerala over the centuries and across different geographies involved a spectrum of socio-economic, political and artistic processes. In spite of the empirical and conceptual breakthrough achieved in the historiography of Kerala during the last quarter of a century, the contributions of the Jains to the formation of society and culture in Kerala have not been properly highlighted and integrated into the mainstream of Kerala historical studies. While emphasis was given mainly on Brahmin settlements' and the temple-oriented socio-cultural systems, the history of the Jains and the Buddhists was relegated to the level of appendices to the mainstream of Kerala history and culture. This brief article proposes to place select epigraphical evidence from the Jain vestiges in Kerala against the background of the medieval history of Kerala as a prelude to an understanding of the socio-economic dimensions, of the spread of the heterodox Jain religio-cultural groups to Kerala.

The presence of the ruined and deserted Jain relics at Kinalur in Calicut district was noticed as early as the late 19th century by William Logan though he could not speculate on its historical and cultural context. T. A. Gopinatha Rao was the first to attempt a historical study of the Jain vestiges and inscriptions in Travancore. The text and translation of a Jain inscription from Tiruvannur near Calicut was published in the South Indian Inscriptions in 1926. The attempt, is to identify Tirukkundavay or Kunavayilkottam, the most reputed of all Jain centres of Kerala, on the basis of literary and inscriptional evidence which subsequently engaged the attention of Ulloor S. Pararheswara Iyer, Prof. Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai and Prof. M. G. S. Narayanan. P. B. Desai was the first to place the history of the Jains of Kerala within a pan-Indian framework though only the site of Tiruchcharanam in the erstwhile Travancore engaged his attention. Unnithan drew attention to the Jain relics at Alathur in Palghat district. Prof. M. G. S. Narayanan's analysis, of the rise of the Perumals and the political, social and economic conditions in Kerala under the Kulasekharas took him also to the proper decipherment and interpretation of Jain inscriptions from Alathur, Thiruvannur, Talakkavu etc. M. R. Raghava Varier highlighted the socio-economic relations of the Jain centres of worship in medieval Kerala. The monograph on Jainism in Kerala by P. K. Gopalakrishnan did not go beyond the concerns of the laymen. The extant studies on Jainism in Kerala and the known Jain sites in Kerala are listed and discussed in a recent doctoral dissertation.

The time bracket taken up for the present inquiry is from the 8th century A.D. to the 16th century A.D. While the first half of this period witnessed the rise and decline of the second Chera kingdom, the latter half witnessed the emergence of a feudalised and fragmented polity in Kerala. The vestiges of the Jain presence that are still extant in Kerala have been dated

to this time-bracket and they include the structural remains of Jain pallis, the vatteluttu inscriptions recovered from the pallis and the adjacent areas, the Jain images etc. In addition, there are references to Jain monastic centres in Silappathikaram and the Manipravala Kavyas of the medieval period. The time span of eight or nine centuries may seem too unwieldy, but the sparse distribution of the evidence in time and space justifies it. Since archaeological evidence on the Jain settlements is scanty, the only reliable source is the corpus of a few inscriptions from the centres of worship. The sectarian division into Digambara and Sveiambara is not of much significance here since most of the sculptural remains have been attributed, mostly on iconographic basis, to the Digambaras.

The epigraphs taken up here for the inquiry are the votive and patronage records of the 9th century A.D. from Tiruchcharanam in the erstwhile state of Travancore; the 9th century A.D inscription from Talekkavu (Wayanad district); the 10 th century A.D. inscription from Alathur (Palghat district); and the 11th century A.D. inscriptions from Tiruvannur (Calicut district) and Kinalur (Calicut district). The context of the inscriptions was either the institution of gift or the installation of images or the proclamation of agreements on the property or the day-to-day affairs of the Jain pallis.

The Jain remains in Kerala are found clustered in Wayanad, central Kerala and South Travancore. The sites with definitive Jain remains are Talekkavu, Tiruvannur, Kinalur, Alathur, Mat-ilakam, Kallil, Tiruchcharanam etc. It is significant that the relics occur along the well-known trade routes that connected Kerala with Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and further beyond. The mercantile base of Jainism as a sub-continental feature is well-known and, as will be shown below, the Jain centres of Kerala also had close-links with trade and market centres. There is enough circumstantial evidence to show the close contacts that existed between these sites and their neighbouring Jain settlements in and around Madurai, Kongu region and Karnataka across the mountain passes of the Western Ghats. The trans-peninsular route of trade and communication-through the Palghat Gap, connecting the Malabar Coast with Madurai, Salem and Coimbatore regions, was in use from a very ancient period onwards. Punch-marked coins and Roman gold coins were discovered along both sides of this route. The area around Coimbatore, Tiruchirappalli, Madurai etc. are also associated with the heterodox religious sects. Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions, palaeographically assigned to the period between the 3rd and 1st centuries B.C., have also been discovered from these areas. It was from these areas in Tamil Nadu that the Jain faith reached Kerala in the context of the trade relations. In fact, this process of commercial and cultural contacts had begun much earlier in the wake of the Mauryan expansion into south India and it had contributed partly to the quickening of socio-economic transformation of south India.

The traditional association of Chandragupta Maurya with the Jain ascetics of Sravanabalagola also proves the early Jain connections with south India. It was as part of the long distance mercantile diaspora that many northern Indian Jain upasakas, reached Kerala for exchange of rarities.

Material evidence of the first phase of the Jain presence has unfortunately not survived in Kerala. The second phase from the 8th century A.D. has left behind artistic, architectural, inscriptional and literary evidence. This phase was, moreover, largely influenced by the religious and cultural developments in Tamil Nadu.

The very nature of the evidence at our disposal on patronage of the Jain establishments in medieval Kerala raises the question of the antecedent stages of sponsoring the construction of apalli or installation of an idol or instituting of permanent provisions in apalli. With a history of monastic background and the patronage by upasakas or lay believers, the Jain pallis required monastic establishments for maintenance, an affluent group of sponsors, and believers partaking in rituals. A reading of the epigraphs in question shows that such socio-economic groups were frequently referred to.

Certain socio-economic categories referred to in the inscriptions may be highlighted here for a better understanding of the nature of patronage enjoyed by the Jain religio-cultural groups. An element of contrast between the nature of the socio-economic base of the Jains and that of the Brahmin settlements, which is reflected in the inscriptions of medieval Kerala, is the mercantile affiliations of the former and the agrarian affiliations of the latter. Geographically, the Jain pallis of Kerala were situated not in the traditional Brahmin settlements or near them, but considerably away from them and near angadis or market centres. Functionally, there was mutual dependence produced by the different levels of economic activities. However, the absence of the Vaisya varna within the social hierarchy of medieval Kerala obscured the status of the Jain groups with mercantile orientation in comparison with that of the Brahmin settlers.

Monks and nuns as a category are found referred to only in the patronage records of the southern site of Tiruchcharanam and their religious activities in the neighbouring Jain centres of Tamil Nadu are also known. Monks like Achchanandi, Utanandi and Viranandi are known to have installed images of Mahavira and the Tirthankaras. Similarly, Gunandangikkurattikal, a nun, instituted a gift of golden ornaments in 926 A.D. during the reign of Vikramaditya Varaguna, the Ay king. It further proves that this southern centre of Jainism was already woven into the organised religious network of south Indian Jainism by the 8th and 9th centuries AD.

All the available Jain inscriptions in Kerala speak of their mercantile association. It has been observed on the basis of the inscriptional evidence that the Jain palli of Tiruchcharanam engaged in banking activities also. A similar instance of non-religious activities by religious institutions can be pointed out in the case of the Tarisappalli of the Syrian Christians of Kurakeni Kollam in the 9th century AD, which engaged in trading activities.

The mercantile and urban corporate bodies mentioned in the inscriptions further clarify the socio-economic base of the Jain groups. One institution that appeared prominently was the trade guild, which took part in the decisions of the pallis and was entrusted with the protection of the property of the pallis. The Talekkavu inscription at the close of the 9th century A.D. refers to Nalpatennayiravar, The Forty Eight Thousand, which founded a nakaram or a town or a market place. The same guild or corporation is also mentioned in the Alathur inscription of 10th century AD. Valanciar is another trade guild mentioned at Alathur along with Nalpatennayiravar. Although the exact nature of organisation or function of these corporate bodies is not known from the inscriptions, they were either participants in the agreements executed or were entrusted

with the protection of the palli and its property. It seems that the palli of Talekkavu was an establishment of the Nalpatennayiravar, which invites comparison with Manigramam of the Kottayam Syrian Copper Plates, which founded a market place and the Tarisappalli at Kollam in the 9th century AD.

The close association of the Nalpatennayiravar with the Jain sites in Kerala gives the character of a trade guild of the Jains though in Tamil Nadu they were associated with Saiva temples. For a better appreciation of the Jain trade corporations and their social interactions, it has to be kept in mind that they were part of a network that connected the hinterland with sea-ports. These were further linked up with the Chola country and ultimately integrated into the sub-continental trade network.

There is no detailed information in the Talekkavu inscription regarding the Nakaram founded by One Nalpatennayiravar. Yet, some of the contemporary inscriptions refer to the nature of the trade activities in the market centres like Kurakkeni Kollam about which mention has already been made above. While the Nakaram referred to was an inland market centre, Kollam was a coastal centre. There is room to believe that the Nalpatennayiravar had a prominent role in the market centre on the basis of the example of Kurakkeni Kollam.

The role of these and similar other trade guilds and corporations in the process of urbanisation in early medieval south India is also relevant here to understand the pan south Indian character of the Jain religio-cultural group. The presence of the trade guilds with the customary right to participate in the affairs of religious bodies and to protect religious institutions was only a reflection of the structured and institutionalised local economy, society and polity of the period. Such institutionalisation of the trade guilds and their structuring of the markets were more or less true of all the trade corporations of the period in south India.

The interest of the rulers, generally referred to as Kulasekharas or the Perumah, of Makotai or Mahodayapuram in the Jain centres is revealed by the association of king Vijayaraga of the late 9th century A.D. with the palli of Vijayaragesvaram, and by the presence of a governor of king Rajaraja of the 11th century A.D. at Tiruvannur. Moreover, the privileged bodyguards or companions of honour like the Arunurruvar (The Six Hundred) and Elunurruvar (The Seven Hundred), who formed a chosen royal militia attached to the different districts under the rulers of Mahodayapuram, were entrusted the duty of protecting the property of the Jain pallis. Thus, the person of the king and the property of the palli were put on par, which shows the importance that the rulers of Mahodayapuram had attached to the Jain pallis.

One common unifying factor as seen in the epigraphical records analysed here is the acknowledgement of the centrality of the Jain centre of worship at Tirukkunavay as a model that set norms for the other Jain pallis, the agreements executed thereunto and the management of the property of the pallis. It has been observed that while the contemporary temple records of Kerala quote either the rules and regulations obtaining in the neighbouring temples or else those obtaining in Tirumulikkalam temple situated near the Chera capital of Makotai as the model or precedent to be followed, the Jain records register a significant departure from this general custom. In the Tiruvannur inscription, the property of the deity was prescribed to be protected, treating it as equal to the property of Tirukkunavay. It is stated in the Alathur inscription that those who committed an offence against the agreement recorded in the inscription, shall be deemed as offenders against the deity of Tirukkunavay. Furthermore, they shall be considered as having committed pancapataka or the five sins and that they and their descendents should be kept out from the lands of the palli. The Talekkavu inscription also echoes the same imprecations and consequences in the event of obstruction of palli property or the agreements. In fact, violation of socio-economic regulations was met with religious and so-

cial ostracism. This custom of imposing religious and social ostracism to prevent erring behaviour was common in the Brahmin settlements also. The volume of cultural integration of the Jain groups with the medieval Kerala society can be gleaned, on the one hand, from the reference to the performance of kuttu or the dance-drama that was symbolic of the cultural and community life of the Brahmin temples of medieval Kerala at the Jain pallis, and on the other, to the tenancy system in vogue.

There is now agreement among scholars regarding the identification of Tirukkunavay as Matilakam or Trikkanamatilakam where archaeological excavations brought out foundations of medieval temples, Chola coins and other antiquities. Tirukkunavay was to the Jains of medieval Kerala what Tirumulikalakam was to the Brahmin settlements. Proximity to the Chera capital, the warmth of royal patronage and the flourishing trade at Makotai might account for the fame and importance of this centre. It may not be farfetched, however, to think that the model of Tirukkunavay, magnified in the inscriptions, contains aspects of exclusiveness and collusiveness on the part of the Jains as a religio-cultural group in medieval Kerala. The anxiety expressed in the inscriptions regarding violation or obstruction of the property of the pallis also points to the growth of exclusiveness on the part of the Jains in the context of the anti-Jain and Buddhist content of the temple-centred Bhakti movement of the period.

One central concern of the Bhakti movement was the opposition towards Jainism and the legitimisation of the agrarian feudal order which caused the decline of the Jains and the subsequent absorption into the Hindu fold. That the mercantile association of Tirukkunavay continued in the 11th century A.D. and even as late as the 15th century A.D. also can be un-

derstood from the Manipravala Kavyas. Thus, there was more or less continuity in the nature of the socio-economic base of the Jain religio-cultural groups in the medieval history of Kerala.

The picture that emerges of the Jain centres of medieval Kerala is one of the gradual cultural absorption in spite of their separate cultural and religious affiliations. They shared a good deal of the cultural totality of the temple-centred society, economy and the feudalised polity as can be understood from the Jain inscriptions. To what extent they were absorbed into the milieu of the temple - oriented society cannot be determined precisely at the present stage. Paradoxically, the traditional social hierarchy of medieval Kerala had no theoretical space for accommodating the traders and it was within this lack of space that the various groups of traders including the Jains operated in Kerala. The process of the Jain pallis becoming Hindu temples even before the close of the medieval period had much to do with the Bhakti movement. The cultural vestiges of the Jains in language, place names, rituals, folk culture, etc. can shed much light in understanding the latter phase of the history of the Jains in Kerala. The history of the Jains which had begun outside the temple-centred agrarian corporations later on became a part and parcel of the history of the temple-oriented society and culture by the time when the Jain religio-cultural groups were ultimately absorbed into the Hindu fold in Kerala. Enmeshed in this history are facets of patronage as acts of exchange in which various socio-economic categories, predominantly the mercantile and the urban, participated. The Jain vestiges in Kerala are the material evidence of a cultural transaction that produced cultural symbols, which became part of the legacy of the Jains to Kerala history and culture.

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