

Historical Aspects of the Legend of Cheraman Perumal of Kodungallur in Kerala

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Abstract

A sliver of a state in India's deep south, Kerala is shaped by its landscape – almost this swathe of soul-quenching green will slow your stride to a blissed-out amble. Kerala is a world away from the frenzy of elsewhere, as if India had passed through the Looking Glass and become an altogether more laid-back place. Kerala which proclaims that the mosque was established 600km of glorious Arabian Sea coast and beaches, a languid network of backwaters and the spice and tea-covered hills of the Western Ghats. As relaxing land, just setting foot on when Prophet Muhammad was alive. It also means that this particular mosque was established before the first mosques in Iraq (639 CE), Syria (715 CE), Egypt (642 CE), and Tunisia (670 CE) thus making it oldest mosque after the first mosques in Saudi Arabia and China. The interesting question is why would a mosque be established so far away from the deserts where Islam was spreading? Who was behind it and more importantly, is the mosque as old as it claims?

Keywords: Kerala, Cheraman Perumal , Prophet Muhammad

Introduction

There is a popular story behind this mosque which is well known in Kerala even today. Once a king — a Cheraman Perumal — was walking on the balcony of his palace when he spotted the moon splitting into two and joining back again. Bewildered, he consulted a few astrologers, who confirmed that such an event had indeed occurred and was not a mystical experience. Few months later, he got a few Arab visitors on their way to Ceylon and from them, the king learned that Prophet Muhammad was behind this miracle and he was the founder of a new religion. The king did something drastic. He abdicated the throne, divvied up the kingdom and set sail to Mecca to meet this man. He met the Prophet and converted to Islam and lived in Arabia for a while. Then to spread the religion in his homeland, the converted Perumal returned to Kerala, but he died somewhere along the way.

Later, few of his followers reach Cranganore and it is they who set up the first mosques, including the one at Kodungallur. According to the legend, Saraf Ibn Malik, Malik Ibn Dinar, Malik Ibn Habib, Ibn Malik and their wives and friends were responsible for establishing the first mosques at Kodungallur, Kollam (in North, not Quilon), Maravi (Matayi), Fakanur, Manjarur (Mangalore), Kanjirakuttu (Kasergode), Jarfattan (Karippat), Dahfattan (Dharmatam), Fandarina (Pantalayani Kollam) and Caliyath (Chaliyam near Beypore)

There is one thing to be noted about Cheraman Perumal. That was not the name of a particular king, but a title. Cheraman was the name of the dynasty of Chera rulers and Perumal meant, 'the great one'. According to *Keralolpathi* (Origins of Kerala), written in the 17th or 18th century, following various conflicts in the 9th century, the representatives of 64 settlements in Kerala brought the Perumals from outside Kerala and each one was to rule for 12 years. There have been exceptions, though and once such exception would play an important role in this story.

First, is this story really true?

This story is found in a Muslim account recorded by Sheikh Zeinuddin as well as in the Brahminical narrative, *Keralolpathi*. The story has been retold countless times by the Portuguese, Dutch; the court chronicles of Calicut and Cochin begin with this narrative. There is epigraphic evidence as well: a Chola inscription mentions that the Cheras took to the sea after they were attacked which historians interpret to mean the Cherman Perumal voyage. There is evidence even from Arabia about the tomb of a king from Malabar who converted to Islam. Thus there seems to be sufficient evidence to suggest that a king from Malabar converted to Islam. That brings us to the second question: When?

This fascinating tale of a Kerala king meeting the Prophet was first recorded in 1510 CE by the Portuguese writer Duarte Barbosa. Barbosa, who would later become Ferdinand Magellan's brother-in-law and would join him on his trip around the world, reached Kerala in 1500 with his uncle and stayed there for five decades. Quite conversant in the local language and based on his familiarity with the traditions and customs, he wrote the story of this Cheraman Perumal based on what he had heard.

His version goes as follows: Around 600 years before Barbosa's time, there was a mighty lord named Chirimay Perumal, whose capital was a popular port for pepper trade. The Moors who came for trade had

numerous discussions with the king and they converted him to Islam. He went to Mecca in their company and died either there or on the way back; the Malabar people never saw their king again. Barbosa also wrote that the single kingdom which Cheraman Perumal ruled was partitioned into three — Cannanore, Calicut and Quilon — with Calicut having the right of coinage. But pay attention to one little detail: Barbosa mentions that this incident happened 600 years back and not 875 years.

The next version of this story was written eight decades later by Sheikh Zeinuddin, a Malayali Muslim with Arab ancestry. In his account, a set of Arab Muslims reached Cranganore on their way to Adam's foot in Ceylon (See: How did Adam reach Sri Lanka). The king invited them to his palace and in what must be one of the easiest conversion attempts in the world, converted after listening to their conversation. He divided the kingdom and secretly went to Arabia with the pilgrims which agrees with what Barbosa wrote. Zeinuddin also mentioned that this king was ruler of the land from Kasargod to Kanya Kumari and gives an important detail regarding the date. According to him, this incident did not happen during the lifetime of the prophet, but two centuries later.

In 1610 CE, another version of this story came out from another Portuguese writer named Joas de Barros. Barros was an administrator in the House of India and Mina in Lisbon and was responsible for dispatching various fleets to India and his work was completed by Diogo de Coutos. According to his account, Cheraman Peruman was a great king and his kingdom was frequented by many Moors for commerce. According to Barros, these Moors were religious fanatics and converted the king to Mohammedanism. He moved to Calicut and the Moors there made him believe that he had to go to Mecca to save his soul, which he promptly did after diving up his kingdom. This was the time when the Portuguese had to resort to sea voyages to avoid Muslim controlled land route and were in competition with the Muslim traders to gain favours with the kings of Kerala for trade rights. Some of that antagonism is visible in the language.

Coutos then adds a twist to the tale which makes this very interesting. According to him, the Perumal was close to the St. Thomas Christians based in Kodungallur and would not do anything without consulting them. Coutos drops a bombshell by adding that he was converted to their holy faith, implying that the Perumal was converted to Christianity and not Islam. Coutos also mentions that the Perumal died in the house of Apostle St. Thomas in Mylapore and thus disagreeing with the Mecca trip.

Thus within a century, you see the story being retold to based on the convenience of the Portuguese who were doing excellent trade in Malabar. But there is one data point that stands out in the narrative of Barros. He writes that the king, Sarama Perumal reigned 612 years before "we" landed in India. It is not clear if that refers to the period when Barros' ships landed in Malabar or if it refers to Vasco da Gama's first voyage of 1498. Even if you take 1498 CE, the king would have reigned in 886 CE which is two centuries after the date mentioned on the board at the Cheraman Perumal Juma Masjid. In 1723, the Dutch chaplain Canter Visscher wrote about this story, with another twist. He agrees that Cheraman Perumal was a great king who distributed his kingdom and undertook a voyage. The journey was, "either to the Ganges in fulfillment of a vow or as the Moors say to visit Mahomet in Arabia for the purpose of embracing his religion" implying that there were multiple theories existing at that time. The Cheraman Perumal story continued in the accounts of Dutch Commander Van Adriaan Moens (1781 CE), Francis Buchanan (1801 CE), Keralolpathi (17th or 18th century) and Granthavari (19th century).

Though there are minor variations and the influence of local politics, the Portuguese and Muslim accounts agree on one thing: a king from Kerala set off to Mecca, but this Cheraman Perumal did not travel in the time period mentioned in the board outside the mosque. But, this should be a relatively simple problem to solve. If this incident did happen, then all you need is figure out who was the last Cheraman Perumal and that is where temple inscriptions are helpful.

There is an inscription of Vikrama Chola dating to 1122 CE which mentions that while the Pandyas took to the Ghats, the Cheras took to the sea. There are other statements in that inscription which have been proven historically and hence there is some truth to the Cheras taking to the sea as well. Historians read this to mean that the last Chera Perumal, who was Rama Kulasekhara, left by sea. There is a record from another temple which mentions that a garland was offered to the deity for the benefit of Cheramar Rama which meant that the Rama Kulasekhara lived till 1122 CE.

This points to a date much later than the ones mentioned by the Portuguese and Muslim sources. There is more evidence on this front. According to the tradition the Perumal who reached Arabia sent some messengers to preach Islam in Kerala who established ten mosques, of which one is at Matayi. According to an inscription found at that mosque, it was built in 1124 CE, two years after the disappearance of Cheraman Rama Kulasekhara. Since we know the name of the king, it is easy to find references to other kings who were contemporaries and that can help solve the mystery. Two kings mentioned in connection with the last Perumal are Udaya Varman of Koluttunad and Kavivamsha of the Tulu kingdom. Based on an inscription, Udaya Varman has been dated to the early 12th century and the Alupa King Kavivamsha ruled in the first half of the 12th century.

This complicates the narrative. From the story taking place in the 8th century, we have moved to the

12th century. Now comes another story which throws a spanner into the works. It turns out that this story was known in Arabia as well. In 1882, William Logan recorded an incident where 15 years back a man came from Arabia soliciting funds for the repair of a mosque and tomb. This tomb, located in Zapahar in the Arabian coast had an inscription which said that it belonged to Abdul Rahman Saimiri, a king of Malabar. The inscription mentions that this man reached in year 212 of the Hijera. The name in the tomb looks like it was a Samuthiri, but there is no such record of a Zamorin traveling abroad and getting converted. There is one thing though: this was an important event in Kerala's history with the disintegration of central rule and the formation of many small kingdoms. But was the disappearance of the king the reason for this change or was the change that happened tagged to the departure of the king?

The Cheras were under attack by the Chola and Pandya forces and the king would have been forced to make deals with Jews, Muslim and Christian traders for financial and military assistance displeasing the Nairs and Brahmins. The revenue would have been affected and with an ungovernable kingdom, an easy way out would have been the abdication of the throne. With the Cholas and Pandyas attacking the north and south, many areas would have become independent of the central power and the partition of the land may have been just a formal recognition of the ground reality. The Perumal's Mecca voyage was a symbolic tale which captured all of this.

The Brahminical narrative, *Keralolpathi*, has another reason for this departure. First, the Perumal was upset having reigned for a long period the land which was the gift of Parasurama and wanted to make amends. The Perumals were supposed to rule for 12 years and make way for the next one; this one ruled for 36 years. Second, he had the supreme commander of the armed forces killed on the basis of a woman's words which he regretted later and so conversion to Islam was probably a way out.

As we go through written records, temple inscriptions and legends, this story gets murky. At this point we have two possible dates for this event: the 9th century and 12th century. It is not a difference of a few decades, but a few centuries. Some people thought he took a trip to the Ganges and another thought he was converted to Christianity and not Islam. There is even a suggestion that it was not a Perumal, but a Zamorin. Sometimes, from these different versions you learn more about the writer and his politics than the truth, like a kind of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle applied to historiography. Even though the mystery is not solved, it seems that a person some repute reached Mecca from Malabar, and it seems clear that the incident did not happen in the period mentioned in the board.

Cheraman Perumal, the reigning King of Kerala, with Kodungallur as its capital, once experienced an unusual dream of the new moon being split into two halves at the horizon. His Court astrologers could not give him a satisfactory explanation. Later when a group of Arab traders on their way to Ceylon met the Perumal, he mentioned about his dream. They explained that this could probably be the miracle Prophet performed at Arabia (Holy Qur'an-54:1-5).

This explanation convinced him and he decided to embrace Islam. His decision to leave for Mecca was kept a secret. He divided his land and assigned various territories to local chieftains to ensure smooth governance. He then left for Mecca, met the prophet and embraced Islam. He spent some years there and while returning home, fell ill and died at Dhufar in Oman. Before his death, he wrote letters to local rulers of Malabar and handed them to his friends. Later, when Malik Bin Dinar and his companions reached Kodungallur, the letters were handed over to the ruling chieftains. They were given permission to construct mosques in different places. The first mosque in India was thus constructed at Kodungallur and Malik Bin Dinar himself was the first Ghazi of this "Cheraman Masjid". After a while he appointed his relative Habib Bin Malik as the Ghazi at Cheraman Masjid and traveled across the length and breadth of Kerala. He established different Mosques in different parts of Kerala. Later, he left for Arabia where he died. It is believed that the old tombs now at Cheraman Mosque belong to Habib Bin Malik and his wife Khumarriah.

KERALA & KODUNGALLUR MUSLIM HERITAGE

Musris as it was called in ancient days; Kodungallur is only an appendix in history today. It was the cradle of Kerala culture centuries ago. Dating back to even 400BC it was a vibrant emporium of trade with East and West. Pliny the Elder (23–79 AD) called her "Primum Emorium Indiae" - the most important Indian port. Phoenicians, Romans, Greeks, Arabs, Persian and Chinese were here in Musiris. Muchiripattanam, referred to in Valmiki Ramayana is just another pointer to its antiquity.

Augustus Caesar (63 BC –14 AD) had built a temple and protected it by two cohorts at Kodungallur to protect his trade interests. St. Thomas landed here in AD52 and Jews fleeing Jerusalem in AD 69 from the pogrom by Caesar Titus found a haven at Kodungallur. For more than 3000 years, Kerala had a flourishing maritime trade. The merchants from all over the then known world flocked in attracted by the spices, condiments, jewels and various flora and fauna of this ancient land. Even before 800 BC navigators of China and Arabia knew the nature and the trade potential of the monsoon winds. Indian maritime traders were using the monsoon winds to reach Babylon as early as 700 BC.

Teakwood from Kerala has been identified in the Moon-Attur temple of Mesopotamia and in the 6th century BC Palaces of Nebuchadnezzar. There are details about the spices of Kerala in the Holy books of Jews. Etymologists have noticed interesting phonetic similarities in mercantile nomenclature of ancient Tamil, Greek and Arabic words. The Malayalam words like 'Karpooram' and 'Inji' became "Carpion and Ginger". The Tamil word "Arisi" metamorphosed to rice (English) through Orisi (Greek). William Logan has identified Keralite colonies in Arabia and in the Island of Socotra in the Gulf of Aden. Some historians like Strobaw, found close similarities in the social customs of Nairs of Kerala and some tribes of Arabia. It was around 900 BC Queen Sheba presented the spices of Kerala to King Solomon.

Total absence of reliable historical records makes early history of Kerala a bundle of myths and legends. The intense dynastic struggle that existed then, culminated in the election of a ruler called Perumals. The political scene in Kerala is clearer only after the abdication of the last of the Perumals, Cheraman Perumal. The European period (1498-1947) begins with the landing of Vasco de Gama at Kappad near Kozhicode in 1498. HyderAli's invasion of Malabar in 1766 had tremendous influence in the socio-political scene of Kerala. The reign of Tipu Sultan was the beginning of the long and torturous road to the empowerment of the common man. The fall of Mysore in 1792 placed India into the colonial hands and the Kerala society into yet another period of social and economic "Dark Age" forcing Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), a century later, to utter his famous observation on Kerala as "a lunatic asylum". The upper caste atrocities with the connivance of the British were so suffocating that there were about 300 anti-British peasant rebellions between the fall of Tipu (1750-1799) and the Malabar Rebellion (1921).

Malabar rebellion of 1921 had great impact in Kerala Islamic history especially that of Kodungallur Muslims. The Ulemas of Malabar found a perfect haven at Kodungallur to escape police atrocities during the rebellion. The receptive minds of the affluent Muslims of Kodungallur amalgamated with the progressive and intellectual brains of the Ulema created a chain of events resulting in the formation of an organization called "Muslim Aikya Sangham" in 1923 at Eriyad, Kodungallur. .

Aikya Sangham and its ideologies were well accepted by the community. Thus under the aegis of Aikya Sangham a total of 1497 schools were started in Muslim dominant areas of Cochin and Malabar. They reformed Madrasa syllabus and modernized Madrasas with benches, desks, black boards. They supplied books, slates and pencils and other study materials free to all students. Mid-day meal at a regular basis was started and all these were open to students of all castes and creed. They encouraged the Muslim community to accept government scholarships and established scholarships of their own. Female literacy was promoted with great emphasis. They were instrumental in establishing a system where Arabic Munshis (teachers) were to be appointed by the government in Muslim dominant areas. The result had far reaching effects. By the time the nation became independent the general literacy of Muslims of Kodungallur was almost at par with that of general population and Muslim female literacy was far ahead of the national Muslim average. It is interesting to note that the village of Eriyad, Kodungallur from where Aikya Sangam originated, has the largest number of Muslim lady doctors now. It is also to be noted that when only a few affluent families were literate in Muslim Community, the general and secular literacy has percolated to the grass root level at Kodungallur even at the beginning of the 20th century. To this great achievement the community is indebted to the vision, courage, and commitment of leaders like, Kottapurath Seethi Mohammed Sahib, Manapat Kunhumohamed Haji, Janab Seethi Sahib and other leaders of Aikya Sangham. Janab Mohamed Abdurahman Sahib was a great leader of Freedom movement and Janab K.M. Ibrahim Sahib son of Seethi Mohamed Sahib and younger brother of Seethi Sahib was a great parliamentarian. Dr P.K. Abdul Gafoor, the founder President of M.E.S is also from Kodungallur. .

CHERAMAN MASJID - HISTORY

The Oral tradition is that Cheraman Perumal, when he was convinced of his imminent death, wrote letters to his relatives in Kerala among whom he had partitioned his kingdom before leaving for Mecca. These letters were handed over to his companions. After a while, when Malik ibn Dinar came to Kerala, he brought the letters written by Perumal. In his letter he had asked his relatives "to receive the bearers of the letter and to treat them well". The rulers of Kerala honoured the letter and permitted Malik Ibn Dinar and his fellow Arab Muslim traders to establish mosques at different places of Kerala. This mosque at Kodungallur is the first to be established. Kerala Vyasana Kunhikuttan Thampuran (1864-1913) is of the opinion that a defunct Buddha vihar was handed over to the nascent Muslims to establish a mosque there.

It is believed that the mosque was first renovated or reconstructed sometime in the 11th Century AD and later again 300 years ago. The last renovation was done in 1974 when, as a result of increase in the population of the believers, an extension was constructed demolishing the front part of the mosque. The ancient part of the mosque including the sanctum sanctorum was left untouched and is still preserved. Another extension was made in 1994 to accommodate the ever increasing number of believers. When yet another extension to the mosque was needed in 2001 it was decided to reconstruct this in the model of the old mosque. It is a matter of great pride that devotees and substantial number of pilgrims are from non-Muslim communities. The Mohalla

Committees have encouraged this and the secular credentials of the mosque are dearly preserved. Offerings of Iftar during the fasting month of Ramzan are being made by the non-Muslim communities. Many non-Muslim devotees are conducting "Vidhyarambham of their children at the mosque.

The Cheraman Jum'ah Masjid is a mosque in Methala, Kodungallur Taluk, Thrissur district in the Indian state of Kerala. The Cheraman Masjid is said to be the very first mosque in India, built in 629 AD by Malik Ibn Dinar. It is believed that this mosque was first renovated and reconstructed in the 11th century AD. Many non-Muslims conduct initiation ceremonies to the world of letters of their children here.

Since ancient times, trade relations between Arabia and the Indian subcontinent were active. Even before Islam had been established in Arabia, Arab traders visited the Malabar region, which was a major link between the ports of South and Southeast Asia. With the advent of Islam, the Arab merchants became carriers of the new religion and they propagated it wherever they went. Cheraman Perumal, the Chera king, went to Arabia where he met the Prophet and embraced Islam and changed his name to Tajuddin. From there he had sent letters with Malik Ibn Dinar to his relatives in Kerala, asking them to be courteous to the latter. According to Burnell he was a contemporary of Islamic Prophet Muhammad. Belief goes that a group of Arabs led by Malik Bin Deenar and Malik bin Habib arrived in north Kerala and constructed a Masjid at Kodungalloor, naming it after their contemporary Cheraman Perumal.

The mosque has an ancient oil lamp which always burns and which is believed to be more than a thousand years old. People of all religions bring oil for the lamp as offering. Like most mosques in Kerala, this mosque allows entry for Non-Muslims.¹ The then president of India Abdul Kalam is among the notable visitors to this mosque.

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