

RITUALS AND REALITIES: VALLIYURKKAVU A HISTORICAL ENQUIRY

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Abstract

Rituals are the reflections of human thought. In every society we can observe some rituals that determine the basic structure of a society. Kerala society believed in rituals, oracles and myths. In Kerala religious institutions are the nerve centre of social discourse. In Wayanad valliyurkkavu became a key centre through which the whole social interactions took place. The largest tribal population of Kerala is in Wayanad. Tribes of Wayanad blindly believed in rituals and customs of valliyurkkavu. To them rituals and beliefs are their life breaths. The rituals practiced in valliyurkkavu were utilized by the upper caste to establish their social domination. Rituals that followed in Valliyurkkavu like Nilpupanam, Valliyurkkavu oath and Dhaivam paadi created a power structure in which the tribes became acquiescent. Through discourse analysis this paper is an attempt to interpret realities behind the origin of rituals that practiced in Valliyurkkavu.

Key words: Tribe, Bonded labour, Rituals, Migration, Power structure

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In Kerala the largest tribal population is in Wayanad who still practice age old customs and rituals. Tribes are homogenous ethnic group with a specific sense of identity based on common language and culture. In this area they form more or less, a compact group. The majority of the tribes of Wayanad are primitive cultivators and bonded labourers. The important tribes who inhabit in this region are Paniyas, Kurichyan, Mullukkurumbas, Uralikkurumbans or Vettakurumbans, Kattunaikans or Thenkurumas and Adiyas. The gradual spread of “higher productive organization of caste society” under Hinduism, tribes became the target of exploitation by the chieftain and overlords who imposed various obligations on them.

Wayanad taluk was so important centre of Travancorean settlement that in popular usage, the migration to Malabar is some time referred as the Wayanad migration (Tharakan, 1978). It is the only tribal area in the state where the tribals were predominantly the agrestic slave of traditional (non tribal) *Jenmis* and continued to exist as bonded laborers (Kunhaman, 1989).

In all societies and at all time some type of exploitation of disadvantage groups has been going on. A group which is in an advantageous position in the society exploits other groups that are weak and deprived of power structurally and organizationally (Gurumurthy, 1996). In Wayanad we can analyze some feudal elements through the system of bonded labour. This feudal element became stronger towards the end of the 17th century when Wayanad came under the control of the Raja of Kottayam, a principality located between Tellichery and Wayanad. The recognition of an external authority was the first change introduced in the hitherto isolated primitive tribal society of Wayanad (Kunhaman, 1989). Migration became an imperative aspect behind the tribal issue. Migration is a movement mobilized by land hungry dwarf peasants, who wanted a better life in the virgin land of Malabar (Kurup.KKN, 1998). As a part of it hills and forest are occupied by private individual for settlement purpose.

There are two traditional interpretations existed related to the origin of Valliyurkkavu. Some scholars point out that Valliyurkkavu was a temple of valluvars, a servile caste of labourers and fisherman. But the local tradition points to a quite different origin which is traced to kodungallore temple. Nalveetil nambiars are the velichapads (oracles) attached to the Kodungallore temple. They lead an itinerant life and live on the offerings they receive from the

Hindu houses. In their peregrinations they carry with them a sword, which was an emblem of the deity, serves as an easy passport for their livelihood. In the olden days two such men arrived in Wayanad with the object of visting the holy shrine at Tirunelli. One morning they left mananthavady for the temple, but having missed their way found them in a thick jungle. The heat of the sun was intense and the stream in the vicinity tempted them to take a plunge therein. They performed usual puja to the sword, took light refreshment and leaving the sword in the adjoining ant- hill, rested in the delightful shade of the thick foliage of trees. When they awoke they found the sword missing and a search was made with no effect. Meanwhile a Kurichya boy who was grazing his cattle brought the happy tidings that a sword was seen suspended on a creeper of the adjoining hill. The pilgrims hastened to the spot and tried to take hold of the sword. It would not leave the creeper in spite of their efforts and they noticed the sword rising higher and higher in the air the moment they attempt to touch it. In appealing terms they addressed the sword and repeated several times the words “Valliyur Amma” (O Mother! disentangle thyself from the creeper). These entreaties were not responded and the pilgrims left the place and reported the matter to the local chieftains, Edacheana Nair and Vemoth Nambiar.they visited the place and attempted to touch the sword and it dropped down, sticking fast in the ground. The miraculous incident was reported to the Rja of Kottayam, then the ruler of Wayanad. The Raja visit to the spot was followed by oracular utterances from a Velichappadu(oracle) in the following terms :-
“I desire to settle in the locality in three different places and in three different forms: first as “Vana Durga” in the where the sword fell, as “Jala Durga” in the pool of the adjoining stream and lastly as “Bhadrakali” in the middle of the above two places and a temple should be erected with the four eaves of the roof projecting in to the four oceans”. The Raja expressed his utter inability to undertake the construction of a temple in the manner indicated; whereupon the goddess declared that no edifice was then necessary and she would prefer to remain exposed to the sun and rain. After this incidents, Raja made arrangements for the daily Puja, which was entrusted to Cherangote Nambidi,Edachana Nairand Vemoth Nambiar who were appointed managers. (C. Gopalan Nair, 1911)

In order to exploit the tribes and to strengthen their control over them, *jenmis* diplomatically used rituals and mythological tradition of vallyyurkkavu.

P.R.G Mathur observes that “It is interesting to point out that there are twenty devaswams (trusts) in Wayanad and majority of them are owned by Nair and Varrier communities. The result is that tribals of Wayanad are attached to one or other land lords. They are traditionally attached to their land lords as kundal panikkar. The traditional manner of recruiting the tribals as bond labourer is by advancing loans at the valliyurkkavu festival in the last week of March. The most significant feature of the system is that a tribe pledges not only himself but the members of his family as well against loan and until the debt is discharged all of them are bound to work for the creditor for which they get only daily meals and pittance in kind. Besides valliyurkkavu the tribals were also recruited as bond labourers on the Ponkuzhi temple festival day on the month of Meenam at Muthanga village (Mathur, 1977). Edgar Thurston (1909) referred, in the middle of the last century, when planters first began to settle in Wayanad they purchased the land with Paniyas living on it, who were practically slaves of the land owners. Through the article ‘*Political awakening among the tribes of Wayanad*’, P.R.G.Mathur argued the ruthless exploitation by the plainmen and money lenders added to the economic distress and social degradation of the tribal people of Kerala in general and Wayanad in particular (Mathur, 1982).

Valliyurkkavu played a vital role in the social structure of Wayanad. The words of Bolan, a paniya who live in Mananthavadi reflects the role of ‘*valliyuramma*’ in their daily life. They trace their origin from *Valliyurkkavu* so that to paniya tribe *Valliyurkkavu* and its mythology is their life breath. (Bolan, 2015) In the annual festival of march-april at the temple of *Valloorkavu bhagavathi*, where traditionally all tribal families would gather and the land lord or their agents would approach the headmen or heads of families of the tribal people and advance various amounts to them. The acceptance of the amount would entail a bond on oath before the goddess that the tribal family would stay in accommodation provided by the ‘master’ and work for him for nothing more than subsistence and customary gifts at holy and festival days. They believe themselves as an object of nature so they are not willing to deviate from their words and deeds. Thus the entire family would be bound to work. Thus *valliyurkkavu* became an institution used by the immigrants to discipline, exploit and to recruit the tribes. The system was enforced by exploiting the religious belief of the tribal people and *Valliyurkkavu* became a meeting place of buyers and seller of agricultural labourers. Thus it has to be said that the institution of

Valliyurkkavu and the deity has its own influence and witnessed in the process of historical exploitation of tribes by others.

“Dhaivam Paadi” a religious ritual performed in Valliyurkkavu. The person who performs the ritual is Kurup who were also known as Dhaivam Paadi Kuruppanmar, they were also known as Theyyam paadi Kuruppanmar. They recite the myth behind the origin of Valliyur Amma and bless the people through oracles. People considered this traditional rituals and oracles are sacred and they are abiding to follow the oracles.

Even though it satisfied the minds of the believers it is usually performed Kurup,s a higher caste of society. Through oracles they expressed their power and it indirectly used as a media through which they can create an obedient group. Oracles are considered as the words of gods. So it guide the orthodox believers especially the tribes.



Figure 1 Religious Ritual: Dhaivam Paadi

Thus all objects are the objects of discourse meaning depended up on a socially constructed system of rules. In Wayanad mythology acts as an agent to exercise power to cement the relationship between tribes and non tribes. *Kundal pani* (bonded labor) and *valliyurkkavu oath*, *Dhaivam paadi* are used as a conscious strategic effort by a group of people (immigrants)

to legitimate and motivate collective action that led to the progression of subinfeudation in Wayanad as a part of production. Thus non-verbal interaction in the form of psyche and mythological and ritual practices related to *Valliyurkkavu* generated a discourse. This led to a power structure in which tribes are suppressed and depressed.

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