
Cheraman Perumal between Legend and History: A Search of His Existence in Kerala History

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Abstract: Like many other facts in Kerala history, the story of the Chera ruler Cheraman Perumal has also lost its historic value, having become just another fictional story. Doubt has been cast on the truth of this story, and there is religious fervor seems to have inspired the people and historians of Kerala. The early historians of Kerala did not write history on scientific lines. Consequently, they failed to establish a proper relationship between the fact and what they had said. They were also not able to arrive at right conclusions. For writing books about the existence of Perumal they never studied any inscriptions, coins or manuscripts. Their object in writing such works was to impress the contemporary Kerala people about the noble character of the royal families. It is better to look upon this as a conventional attribution to a great king than a reality.

Keywords: Feudatories, Darkness, Traditions, Conversion, Rumour, Salvation, Inscriptions

Introduction

When we read the historical works, one could find out that most of the early history of Kerala based its respective themes on the departure and the conversion of Cheraman Perumal, that means, the stimulus to historical writing would seem to have been given by the great departure of him. On the basis of conventional story, Perumal was the king of legends, who is believed to have ruled over Kerala during a bygone golden era which was marked by stability and peace, and for us he was a missing Kerala ruler. However, his existence in Kerala history is hotly debated one, because it has no archeological or any other historical evidences, but following only on traditional accounts, and even this has no basis in fact. The early history of Perumal is characterized by the hold of religion on the mind of man, which we can see in *Keralolpathy*, the first reference about Perumal. The author of *Keralolpathy* was not a contemporary of the events which he described, or a witness to that departure of the Perumal and we believe it is a Brahmanical work which took shape in the seventeenth century (Krishna Iyer 1979). I am not going to change the image of Perumal, but trying to check his existence in Kerala history because most people utilized his

departure as a base of their operations and privileges; that means his departure was responsible for bringing major political developments in Kerala.

The story of Perumal that each indigenous ruler of Kerala, especially the Kochi Raja, the Zamorin, the Kolathiri Raja and even the Arakkal Kingdom also adopted and suited their different purposes in future. These feudatories themselves believe that they originate from the blessings of Perumal. It is a baseless argumentation. I believe their connection with the legendary figure serves as an important source of power and wealth and making many turns and twists and providing unchallenging privileges, that provided an opportunity to expand. They affirmed certain fundamental rights which no people can override. Not only has it but the creation of Kollam Era and the spreading of Islam in Kerala also connected with him. As history is concerned with analyzing, explaining and describing events of the past, and now we are advanced in many branches of knowledge and that bring to the historian new means of discovering the facts of the past, however, even in the modern period, the conversion of Perumal has been a stimulus to the making of Kerala history. Nothing like it had been seen in the history of the world.

On the Basis of Theocratic History

The past history of Perumal is wrapped in darkness, and none can say with certainty or even reasonable probability when he was lived. Most of the historians follow *Keralolpathy* and according to it he was blessed by supernatural of extra human agencies. This work is not a scholarly one; we consider it as misguided to some extent. Its story originates with Parasu Rama; one of the incarnations of Lord Vishnu, who produced Kerala and brought Perumal or Chera ruler from Tamil Nadu as the 20th Perumal of Kerala. According to the theological conceptions the history of Perumal is the product of divine will. At the same time there is another notion too and according to it, in early days the Cheras, the Pandyas and the Cholas were brothers who originally resided at Korkai, near the mouth of the Tamiraparni River in the Tirunelveli region. While the Pandyas remained at home, the other two brothers eventually got separated (James Hornell 1922: 1).

I believe these are myth and myth is in the nature of theology. Myth is not concerned with human actions at all. In this sense the Indian views of history are all different. We know that the Church historians of Europe made god live in history. Like that, we gave emphasis to the incarnation of god in history and eventually gave it a political twist, emotions play a dominant part. And if we considered *Keralolpathy* as history then it should be pursued by interpretation of evidences. Now the details lack the character of science because it does not attempt to answer questions; the fact recorded is not action on the part of human beings, but action on the part of god. The most shocking fact is that the early historians of Kerala also gave more color to these traditional accounts. They believe this work was the best on the history of Kerala among the historical works of this country. And in this way such writers derive our medieval rulers of Kerala from Parasu Rama or Perumal.

The written sources were an absence in early history of Kerala that I had already noticed, but oral traditions or rumors especially about a mythical hero was particularly important in Kerala society. And according to it, the conversion process began when Cheraman Perumal, who was the reigning of Kodungallur, when a group of Muslim merchants led by Zahiruddin b. Taqi-yuddin on their way to visit the Foot of Adam in Ceylon; 7420 ft. high mountain pilgrimage centre, visited Kodungallur and met the Chera King. He narrated the story of Prophet Muhammad who had converted the unbelievers by the miracle of the moon to the Chera King. When the team returned after their pilgrimage to the Foot of Adam, the king accompanied them to Arabia. There he landed at Shahr, from where he went to Jiddah and visited Prophet Muhammad then in his 57th year embraced Islam (Abdul Samad 1998). He settled there and changed his name to Abdul Rahman Sumuri (Miller 1976) or Tajuddin and married the sister of an Arabian king Habibuddin and stayed there for five years. Then he started his journey to Kerala, but on the way he died at Shahr Muqulla in Yemen on Monday 1st Muharram in the first year of Hijrah (Malik 1998). In connection with the unfinished task of Perumal there are local narratives and inscriptions related to a tomb in Dhofar, a province of Oman in Arabia. According to it, Miles describes that one Abdul Rahman Samuri arrived in Arabia in 212 AH and died 216 AH and this foreign inscription is also similar to claim the Cherman Perumal tradition (Miles 1966).

Rumors Creating History

The story travelled widely all over Kerala and India, wherever Kerala history reached and in the colonial period the European scholars were so much impressed towards the study of Kerala history by the innumerable tales of heroism and conversion of Perumal. These glorifications of Perumal had considerably influenced the works of the Europeans, in other sense; they are dependent on these prevailing rumors for the history of Kerala. The writers of this period were not researchers but mere narrator of stories. Louis de Camoes, the Portuguese poet who was in Kerala in the fifties of the 16th century, mentions in his epic poem, *Lusiad*, the story of the conversion to Islam of a 'Perumal' and division of his country (Camoës 1940). While we read historical work of Linschoten, Perumal has always been special to him and according to his narration:

"In times past the whole land of Malabar was ruled by one king...and the last king Sarama Perimal. The king Sarama Perimal was so deeply rooted in his new sect, that he determined in himself to leave his kingdom, and goes on pilgrimage to Mecca, to see Mohomets grave..." (Burnell 1885).

Barbosa also speaks of the conversion of Perumal, and in the words of him, "Serna Perimal who was a very great lord...that the Moors made him turn Moor, and he went away with them to die at the house of Mecca, and he died on the road" (Barbosa 1866). Similar version is also given by Barros that "When Arabs were settled in the country, this king, Sarama Pereimal, became a Moor and showed them great favour... then they persuaded him that for his salvation he ought to end his life at the House of Mecca. He

agreed ... and determined ... to make a partition of this state among nearest kindred..." (Barros 1973).

The Clash of Thoughts and Absence of Archaeological Remains

While explaining the period of the departure of Perumal, that there is no evidence is available to establish the real date or the fact that Perumal or the Prophet Muhammad was contemporaries. There were so many variations reflect the perceptions of the story. If we believing the opinion of K.M. Bahauddin, who claimed that Cheraman Perumal and the Prophet Muhammad were contemporaries and he advocates that Perumal adopted the name Tajuddin and died at Mecca in AD 624 (Bahauddin 1992). When we considering *Keralolpathy*, reproduced by Dr. Herman Gundert, who speaks of Cheraman Perumal who had gone to Arabia during the year of AD 332, and embraced Islam (Gundert 1961). Considering the fact that the above mentioned date cannot be correct, since the preaching of Islam by Prophet Muhammad started only after AD 610, when he was aged about forty, he heard the voice of the angel Gabriel (Ahmad 2000). Another version says that Cheraman Perumal left for Mecca in 210 AH or AD 825 (Logan 1951). It is significant to note that the Kollam Era commencing in 825 AD came into vogue in Kerala during his departure. According to Zainud-din the conversion of Cheraman Perumal to Islam was not during the life time of Prophet, but it might have taken place two hundred years after Hijrah (Zainud-din 1942).

However there are similarities between the dates of Logan and Zainud-din, both dates were taken place two hundred years after Hijrah. But Kunjan Pillai, a historian known for his reading of early Chera inscriptions, had informed that the ruler who took to Islam might have been in the early 12th century (Kunjan Pillai 1953). According to the study of Matur, the period of Perumal from 9th century to 12th century is one of the best illuminated periods of Kerala region which witnessed fast paced development in spice trade and the last Perumal might have become a convert to Islam in 1124 A.D. (Mathur 1977). These facts indicate that the character of the Perumal on Kerala was written on the basis of religious background and the feelings of religious pride. Not much progress has been made in the methodology of histories written. We know that the Second Chera Empire or the Kulasekharas of Mahodayapuram (800-1102) has been reconstructed from the inscriptions of the age. At the same time we cannot deny the archaeological remains connected with the Second Chera Emperor Rajasekhara Varma, who ruled Kerala during 820-844 periods, not only has it but the most noticeable fact is that he has been identified with the famous Cheraman Perumal. This notion is entirely differentiated from the view of Krishna Iyer who is upholding the concept that Perumal was a Saiva saint who ruled here during 690-751 periods (Krishna Iyer 1979). And here I believe that archaeology is often a reliable guide to the historians. The most striking fact is that Rajasekhara Varma's Vazhapally inscription is the first epigraphic record of a Chera king to be discovered from Kerala. In comparison with the partition of an empire the Vazhapally inscription has only minor importance to Perumal as a ruler. He partitioned and gifted everything related to him, as we believe, but he never given a sanction in the form of inscriptions or any other valuable materials. The

archaeological sources of the history of Perumal, which are found not only in Vazhapally but also in another inscription too, found at the famous Kandiur Temple built by him in 823 AD. These inscriptions remind us of the existence of Perumal period in Kerala history, and they have great significance from the historical point of view.

The Tarisapally Copper Plate or Kottayam Plates of AD 849 is synchronized with the year of Sthanu Ravi Varma (844-885), successor of Rajasekhara Varma which contains two grants to build a church, named Tarisapally and a trading centre at Kollam (Sreedhara Menon 2006). There is another inscription of this Chera emperor in the Kudalmanikkam temple at Irinjalakuda. It is a Major temple of Trissur district which attracts pilgrims in large numbers (Sreedhara Menon 2008). Historical works indicate that the later Ay Kings of South Kerala who were contemporaries of the Kulasekharas have a few important inscriptions to their credit. However, the inscriptions related to the partition of Kerala and the departure of Perumal is of special interest of the student of Kerala history. But nothing has unearthed related to it. By considering the variegated time periods extracted from the historical works by a number of erudite scholars on the basis of circumstantial evidence from inscriptions and literary works, M.G.S. Narayanan suggests that, the conversion of the Chera King might have taken place not during the Prophet's time but in AD 1122 at the time of last ruler of the second Chera Empire (Narayanan 1972). There are similar versions about the period of the Chera Empire and Soundararajan describing it in his historical work as 'the Chera dynasty ruled from before the Sangam age until the 12th century AD over an area corresponding to modern-day Kerala' (Soundararajan 1991). Then the question is remaining, what is the importance of Cheraman Masjid?

The traditional belief is that before Perumal's death, he had sent missionaries under Malik Ibn-Dinar to Kerala Coast to persuade the people to accept the Islamic faith. The local ruler received them well and permitted them to build a mosque at Kodungallur (Figs. 1 and 2). It is said to have been established by Malik Ibn-Dinar and his party, in the year AD 629, just 7-8 years after the Hijrah of the Prophet to Medina. It is a memorial and a historic Muslim worship place located in the Trissur district of Kerala. All the traditional accounts are unanimous in the opinion that the first mosque was that of Kodungallur (Bahauddin 1992) and is often regarded as the second Masjid in the world, after in Medina. But the story of *Keralolpathy* reveals that before leaving for Macca, Perumal entrusted the duty to protect and look after the Muslims including the Qazi to Punturakkon; a local ruler (Gundert 1961). If we believe the words of *Keralolpathy*, there were Muslims and Qazi before the departure of Cheraman Perumal. We know that a Qazi was connected with the duties of a mosque in Muslim majority areas. Historical works suggest that the presence of Muslims in Kerala certainly long predates Perumal's departure and Malik Ibn-Dinar's arrival and its origins are associated with the relationship of the Arabs with the indigenous local women. Therefore, it is natural that mosques became centers from its early periods, for the dissemination of the new ideas and values of Islam religion.



Figure 1: Replica of the Cheraman Juma Masjid Constructed in 629 AD



Figure 2: Renovated Cheraman Juma Masjid in Kodungallur

At this point it is not pertinent to believe that Cheraman Juma Masjid constructed in AD 629 after the departure of Perumal. None can say with certainty when it actually came into being, but the Muslim people of Kerala justifies the year AD 629. It should come as no surprise that a ruler from Kodungallor was the responsible for the medieval history of the rulers of Kozhikode, Kochi, Venad, Kannur, and Arakkal kingdoms. So far, evidence is available that the emergence of Islam in Kerala and the creation of Cheraman Juma Masjid of Kodungallor also associated with the ghost of the missing Chera ruler. When the rulers and the religious heads of Kerala began to search the traditional account for warrant for the use of their position as rulers or nobles or priest, they found no justification whatsoever for the use of it. Just as the theologians and statesmen of medieval Europe appealed to the Bible in support of both Papal and Imperial claims, so the hereditary rulers and the like minded sought for some support of the political theory of the kinship in the religious texts. However, many of the religious scripts were incapable to support their claim. As a final solution they whole fell in the story of Perumal and for them the authority of the story of Perumal was a matter of still greater weight and importance. However, doubt has been cast on the truth of this story and like many other facts in Kerala history, the story of Perumal has also lost its historic value, having become just another fictional story. The only thing that has remained more or less the same is that it marked the Kerala society divided into pieces, facilitating people to live separately under their own petty rulers.

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